

REFLEXIVE FIGURALITY IN THE POETRY OF BLAKE,
WORDSWORTH, ASHBERY AND A.R. AMMONS

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REFLEXIVE FIGURALITY IN THE POETRY
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This study examines figures that modify the meta-language that defines, rationalizes and constrains them. Reflexive figures interrupt meaning—and incorporate that interruption as meaning. They index power (rather than figuring it), setting up the self-reference of tropological language as a central problem in the poetry of William Wordsworth and William Blake, inherited by John Ashbery and A.R. Ammons. For these poets, reflexive figures stage an encounter of figural imagination (or language) with power, conceived as external to language, or alternatively, as the creativity of language itself. Such figures situate the renewal, regeneration or renovation of language and imagination, and in late 20th century literary theory, they have become integral to notions of the linguistic turn, and the irrational signature of power produced when language folds onto itself.

The study reads key passages of Blake's major and minor prophecies, along with his shorter poems, major sections of Wordsworth's *Prelude* and

poetry spanning the careers of Ashbery and Ammons. I conclude by examining the abstract algebra of Wordsworth's friend, the seminal nineteenth century scientist William Rowan Hamilton, and its implications for contemporary notions of the "language of language."

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Brad Zukovic was born in Vancouver, B.C., Canada, and received his B.A. and M.A. in English at the University of Washington in Seattle.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

N	<i>Norton Edition of Wordsworth's Poetry and Prose</i>
E	Erdman edition of <i>The Poetry and Prose of William Blake</i>
W	Jonathan Wordsworth edition of <i>The Prelude</i>
R	Routledge edition of <i>Lyrical Ballads</i>
CPWW	<i>The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth</i>
K	Ketcham (Cornell) edition of Wordsworth: <i>Shorter Poems</i>
C	Jared Curtis (Cornell) edition of Wordsworth: <i>Last Poems</i>
LH1	<i>Life of William Rowan Hamilton, Volume I</i>
LH3	<i>Life of William Rowan Hamilton, Volume III</i>
YNH	<i>Your Name Here</i> , John Ashbery
ASWS	<i>And the Stars were Shining</i> , John Ashbery
DDS	<i>Double Dream of Spring</i> , John Ashbery
HD	<i>Houseboat Days</i> , John Ashbery

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

What does figural imagination encounter when it encounters itself? Is it antithetical creativity? God? Linguistic power? Is it an apocalyptic dimension of metaphor, repressed by the everyday sense in which we “use” a metaphor? This study examines imagination’s capacity to signify its own power, in its alterity, and aestheticize it—or figure it as the ground of possible meaning. I take reflexive imagination to be a special case of a reflexive trope: a structure that emerges as a central concern of Wordsworth and Blake, inherited by A.R. Ammons and John Ashbery.

Post linguistic turn, reflexive imagination gives way to the reflexivity of language. Language folds onto itself to index its own power conceived in two ways: either as a “real” of language that is external to language, or as the irrational principle of linguistic creativity. Rather than taking reflexivity as a property of language or imagination, I define reflexivity as a property of figures. A reflexive figure (as defined in Chapter 2 of this study), is an *abstract* conceit, not tied to any particular story about language or power—“power” takes many forms in this study, but remains a structural placeholder, thematizing the discontinuity posed by reflexive tropes.

I juxtapose poets and critics with very different notions of imagination and/or language, noticing that they employ reflexive figures to invoke power—and do so necessarily. Four poets make us unusually aware of this fact. Wordsworth, Blake, Ashbery and Ammons figure the renewal of imagination or language; the “renovating virtue” of Wordsworth’s spots of time, the Blakean Moment that “renovates every Moment of the Day if rightly placed,” the return of language to the “non-verbal” (Ammons) and the “new weather” or “climate” invoked by Ashbery are all conceits of renewal situated by reflexive figures. In each case, the “re” of renewal turns out to be a complicated problem that I highlight in its formal dimension.

Proceeding inductively in this study, I abstract the form of reflexive figures across a wide range of examples. As I define them in Chapter 2, reflexive tropes modify their own meta-language, manifesting an irrational blind-spot of reflexive form. Even as figural imagination can equivocate between figural and literal agency to produce incongruously embodied metaphors, it can blur or entangle *any* meta-figural dichotomy to signify its power. Such oppositions might include the distinction between tenor and vehicle, use and mention, and the difference between difference and sameness—a meta-difference, allowing the rhetor to talk about the nature of figurality, either as a reconciler of opposites or a generator of difference. Thus, reflexive figures operate on their own definitions and formal constraints at

ever-higher levels, modifying dichotomies that rationalize the theory of tropes, or tropological imagination.

In his famous description of Mt. Atlas, for example, Virgil's writing is not in an overtly mythical mode, and his personification of the mountain pushes the limits of classical decorum by incongruously literalizing it as a man-mountain (at one point, Virgil calls the mountain "*senex*" or "old man"). Summarizing these responses, J. H. W. Morwood notes that "the Atlas picture has been the target of...adverse criticism on the ground that Virgil should have made up his mind whether he was describing a mountain or man" (8). Yet this blurring is what reifies or stonifies Atlas. Flying past the mountain, Hermes provides the point of view in Dryden's translation:

Now sees the tops of Atlas, as he flies,
Whose brawny back supports the starry skies;
Atlas, whose head, with piny forests crown'd,
Is beaten by the winds, with foggy vapors bound.
Snows hide his shoulders; from beneath his chin
The founts of rolling streams their race begin;
A beard of ice on his large breast depends... (463)

With *barba horrida* (horrible beard) Virgil's details begin applying more to a man than a mountain, and the personification threatens to become embodied as an incongruous yoking of opposites. As myth, the passage describes a yoking of animate and inanimate, suffered by a fallen titan whose punishment is precisely that he is caught between opposites, but as personification, the description

threatens to “go over the top,” and violate decorum. This borderline excess is not the threat of pathetic fallacy or fallacy of reification, but a formal effect:

descriptive personification bleeding into myth. In Blake’s more extreme versions of this reification-effect, the fallen Titan suffers tropological transformation as metamorphosis: a turning of tropes into bodily symptoms—signaling a repressed, or materialized form of imagination.

The above figure draws attention to a peculiar point where descriptive personification and myth blur. The sense that we are approaching that border is the sense that the poet has emblemized power—or perhaps, unpleasantly shocked the reader’s sensibilities. The reflexive figure is not just a figure of figure; rather, figurality has indexed itself, or pointed to itself. Perhaps it does so through an interruption (or threatened interruption) of meaning that forces us “outside” of its form. On the other hand, we could take the equivocation of myth and personification as a signature of the incommensurability of power and meaning.

John Ashbery writes “The dirt/Is mounting like a sea. And we say goodbye/Shaking hands in front of the crashing of the waves” (*The Tennis Court Oath*, p. 26). The vehicle of this simile becomes concrete—signaling a moment of reflexive figurality, and its attendant disruption. Such moments recur in Ashbery’s poetry, for example, through a collapse of allegory into concrete particulars.

Conversely, the gap between emblem and idea re-opens, and this opening and closing creates a temporality, or a time of reading that Ashbery calls “other times.”

In Ashbery’s poetry, figures often seem like objects or entities. Romantic versions of such entities are the subject of Chapter 1 of my study, where I juxtapose Blake’s Urizen with the speaker from Wordsworth’s “Resolution and Independence.” I consider a scene from *The Four Zoas*, in which Blake’s Urizen encounters his children, caught between animacy and inanimacy as gloomy wonders of nature. I juxtapose it with the scene of Wordsworth’s speaker encountering the Leech Gatherer—who is “not all alive nor dead.” Like Urizen’s children, the Leech Gatherer incarnates the equivocal “logic” of a figure as an ontological state, indexing imagination as a rupture in cognition. Both poets swap the standpoint of an observer language (meta-language)—from which metaphor is defined as contradiction—for that of an observer for whom metaphor is embodied contradiction. Wordsworth and Blake frame an imagination that is outside of itself (or encountering itself as “other”); a sublime self-reference, in Wordsworth’s case, whereas for Blake, it is a disaster. Drawing on Steven Knapp’s notion of the self-referential sublime, I argue that Urizen, along with Wordsworth’s narrator, encounter the poetic agency that mediates—and drives—their own “thoughts.”

Vincent de Luca has noted that "Because Blake's poems are non-mimetic, there is a blurred distinction between rhetorical figures and scenic dramatizations,

where tropes (already by definitions ‘turns’) palpably turn into metamorphic beings." Elsewhere, de Luca himself blurs metaphor and metamorphosis to index a disorienting kind of power: “Troping is always a *becoming*, a representation of metamorphosis enacted on the level of style—and conversely, things that change their form in time are natural tropes” (75-76). In Chapter 1, I analyze Blake’s blurring of tropological transformations and metamorphosis. Myth blurs into allegory, and personifications become “three-dimensional” (or collapse into flatness again). A gap opens up between power and rational meaning that “rouzes the faculties to act”: reflexive figures anticipate apocalyptic modes of metaphorical identification. At other times, such figures signal a contraction of vision. Blake attempts to frame vision by asserting meta-visionary dichotomies such as contrary vs. negation, center vs. circumference and prolific vs. devourer. Yet, reflexive, or self-limiting turns of power modify these oppositions, or blur them. This is the case in Beulah, a place of repose from the “Wars of Eternity,” where “Contrarieties are equally True” rather than dynamically and productively opposed (128).

In Chapter 2, I model reflexive tropological language by generalizing its structure across very different examples, considering studies of reflexive imagery by W. K. Wimsatt, William Empson, and William Keach. I read Wordsworth’s poem “There was a boy...” from several angles—in comparison with little-read late poems. In considering Paul de Man’s reading of “There was a boy...” I note

his distinction between metaphor and pseudo-metaphor, setting up the latter as an illegitimate substitution of the living speaker and the dead boy: a “leap outside thematic reality into the rhetorical fiction of the sign (10)” and a signature of power. De Man situates the reflexivity of the poem by saying that “the poem does not reflect on death but on the rhetorical power of language that can make it seem as if we could anticipate the unimaginable” (10). In juxtaposition, I consider examples of catachresis in Blake’s poetry, in which the entanglement of myth and metaphor begin to complicate distinctions between analogical and non-analogical substitution, posing discontinuities intended to rouse the faculties.

I also compare and contrast Ashbery and Wordsworth. In *the Prelude*, Wordsworth emphasizes the importance of “chance collisions and quaint accidents” in the childhood development of imagination. As I read this doctrine, however, imagination is entangled with accidents of nature, to signal a power that is disruptive from the beginning. In Wordsworth’s later poetry, mutability is a theme. Nature is a balm upon time’s destruction, but also “recalls” the shocks of time through its aestheticized and “lenient touch.” In Wordsworth’s sonnet “Mutability,” dissolution enters time along a scale of awful notes, whose “concord” is the discordant shock of a tower collapsing. The poem sets up an irreconcilable tension between the flowing, spatialized dimension of music as pattern or “scale” (a temporality of anticipation)—and discrete shocks of tumbling ruin that Dyer

figured as “the voice of time.” Imagination entangles these oppositions to figure the “unimaginable touch of time”—and signifies its own temporality through this entanglement.

For Ashbery, the mutability of language produces fragments that index a foundational “climate” of language, figured as “beginning.” Wordsworth stages a different version of self-indexing power through his spots of time, which I juxtapose with Ashbery’s charged poetic fragments in Chapter 2. The index of power, while thematized very differently in Ashbery and Wordsworth, exhibits structural homologies, readable in the following lines from *The Prelude*:

...and I would stand,
 If the night blackened with a coming storm,
 Beneath some rock, listening to notes that are
 The ghostly language of the ancient earth,
 Or make their dim abode in distant winds.
 Thence did I drink the visionary power;
 And deem not profitless those fleeting moods
 Of shadowy exultation: not for this,
 That they are kindred to our purer mind,
 And intellectual life; but that the soul,
 Remembering how she felt, but what she felt
 Remembering not, retains an obscure sense
 Of possible sublimity... (165)

In analyzing the passage above, Thomas Weiskel invokes the “liminal sublime,” noting that “the mood of shadowy exultation...is here not quite integrated into the order of symbolic sound” (173). Weiskel notes that “The signifier precedes the signified, which may indeed never arrive; or in terms closer to Wordsworth’s, the

subject is initiated into the *how* of the discourse, but not the *what*” (174).

Ashbery’s poetry is also, at times a ghostly language: we remember how we felt when we read it, but we are hard put to explain what we felt, by invoking context, reference or ideas. Here, the common ground between Wordsworth and Ashbery is not theme, but a structure in which salience, potential meaning, and higher-order meaning override particular meaning. Modifying the semiotic model of Weiskel, we might say that figural imagination “hears” its own power to suspend the distinction between signifier and signified—the latter begins to slide under the former (borrowing a formulation of Lacan), to produce “ghostly language.”

When Ashbery’s poetry blurs metaphors into obscurely charged objects, there is a formal analogy to the “liminal” sublime of Weiskel: imagination blocks entry into the symbolic order. The result is that “symbolicity,” *per se*, draws attention to itself—a *reflexive figure*—and a theoretical conceit. Language points to “the very fact of structure...independent of its actual organization” (Weiskel, 175). Interpreting otherwise, imagination, in failing to imagine itself, indexes itself with an inscrutable—yet salient—emblem of its power. Ashbery emphasizes a “forgetting” that is not reducible to the erosion of memory—a decontextualization that produces fragments.

Whereas Wordsworth and John Ashbery affirm the self-reference of an imagination that grasps itself as alien, Blake and A.R. Ammons affirm the self-

devouring (creative-destruction) of visionary form—a form of desire not based on lack in language, but attained by annihilating the physical “self” (Ammons) or the “selfhood” (Blake).¹ This kind of self-reference is performative: in the case of Ammons, energies of metaphorical identification collapse into energies of nature, or intersect with a void of Being. Chapter 3 presents the poetry of A.R. Ammons, for whom humanity is recycled by nature, by analogy to the recycling of dead language. Yet Ammons also acknowledges a resistance to such apocalyptic identifications—a desire to stay with the dead and hang onto a trauma that keeps them alive (the trauma of losing his brother, for example). This impulse ties Ammons to Wordsworth—and halts him before paradoxes of flow that maintain the living and dead alike in a liminal zone, as segments of flow.

Chapter 4 presents a reading of Ashbery’s self-reference. Figuralitv draws attention to its own form, in the way that an abstract painting plays with conventions of representation, or draws attention to the materiality of its paint. Yet Ashbery also says that the poem turns inward on itself in autonomous meaning—even (and especially) when no one reads or understands it. In his Charles Norton lecture on Laura Riding Jackson, Ashbery figures this limit through the lines: “Then open the small secret doors,/When none’s there to read awrong,/Out runs happiness in a crowd...” (qtd. in *Other Traditions* 114-115).

¹ We find Harold Bloom asserting a Blakean version of this dynamical self-reference—against the selfhood and the “quest of the Freudian eros, moving always in a tragic rhythm out from and

Citing Ashbery's "articulate flatness, goal, barrier and climate"—his note at the end of *The Double Dream of Spring* regarding "choosing at random" (DDS 95), Richard Howard notes that "The accent is on both processes equally, the operation of chance, the operation of choice. The poem is already there... The poems are not about anything, they are something, they are their own creation" (38). Yet, an Ashbery poem is also outside of its autonomously self-referential meaning, and trying to investigate its own power in flickers of awareness and oblivion (a different kind of reflexive figure). The poem becomes like a detective—or like a film noir movie, that turns from its subject matter and genre conventions to focus on something dark beyond the frame. Ashbery presents just such a scenario in "Detective Flick" (a poem that I read in the conclusion of this study). In moving between self-identity and self-investigation, the personified poem experiences patterns of "attention and oblivion"—a phrase deployed by Steven Knapp to describe the aphasia experienced by the speaker of "Resolution and Independence," when encountering the poetic agency that mediates his own thoughts.

In concluding, I examine reflexive figures that challenge or illuminate the model of self-indexing power examined in this study. Implicit in the "archetypes" that Wordsworth invokes in *The Prelude* is the notion of force, characterized on the mind as an impression. As I read it, *The Prelude* modifies this doctrine by deferring the depth of a mark. Referring to Derrida's reading of Freud's "Project

for a Scientific Psychology,” I analyze the deconstruction of “depth” as a reflexive figure of deferred “power,” troubling Wordsworth’s doctrine of originary impressions on the mind. In revisiting Blakean reflexivity, I examine Beulah as the figure of an imagination that is “outside” of itself. I also consider Blake’s counter-figure: that of an imagination that turns the outside world inside, through metaphorical identification, and outside again, through a turn to referential language. Ashbery and Ammons, in contrast, present a figural imagination that is fundamentally “outside” of itself: its power intersects with an inhuman void.

In closing this study, I examine a special kind of reflexive figure that interrupts meaning—and re-incorporates the interruption as meaning. The square root of negative one is a contradiction, and interpreted as a “quantity,” it has no apparent referent in the real world. Yet, is named as the number “*i*” and used to solve mathematical equations. In naively examining the aesthetics of imaginary numbers, I focus on William Rowan Hamilton, a 19th-century mathematician who invented new imaginary numbers that violated laws of arithmetic, inaugurating the abstract turn of algebra. Hamilton claimed that his leaps of abstraction were the work of a plastic, mathematical imagination that molded the laws of arithmetic—the mathematics of mathematics, recently highlighted in Leon Chai’s study of Galois, in *Romantic Theory: Forms of Reflexivity in the Romantic Era*. For Hamilton, the mathematics of mathematics makes abstract leaps that reveal the laws of the laws

of nature, at every deeper levels. Moreover, his abstract turn anticipates the modern notion of the language of language—and from standpoint of a history of ideas, informs it.

Imaginary numbers are a reflexive figure—the emblem of an imagination whose ground was mysterious to Hamilton, especially given his (correct) conviction that his work would find applications in physics. Hamilton impressed upon his good friend William Wordsworth the creativity of a deductive mathematical science—and its sympathy with nature. Both men spent long hours on walks, imagining the nature of poetic and scientific imagination.

Lewis Carroll is one of the few readers of Romanticism to have brought Wordsworth and Hamilton together. Carroll mocked the symbolical school of algebra and its validation of meaningless symbols (Pycior 149-51). He probably satirized Hamilton's mathematics in the episode of the Mad Hatter's tea party (Bayley 11). More famously, he parodied Wordsworth's "Resolution and Independence" by depicting a speaker possessed by nonsensical schemes—interrupted by the rambling of an aged, aged man; a subject who drifts in and outside of the poetic agency that mediates her own thought.²

As a final note in the introduction of this study, I want to qualify references to the "inside" or "outside" of imagination. As I note in my conclusion, to use or

² This self-reference should remind us of the sublime self-reference read by Steven Knapp in "Resolution and Independence" (Knapp 129).

mention the word “Boston” is not the same as using or mentioning a metaphor. The latter can call flat, or we might imagine that we are carried by its transport. By loose analogy to locating a statement “inside” of an object language, we might imagine (as poets and critics sometimes do), that there is a formal standpoint located “inside” of the language of imagination, the language of the dream and so forth. Formally speaking, this theoretical inside is most characteristically indexed by disruptions in logical form—and it is here that theory sets up a reflexive turn of trope.

Autonomous form means that metaphor is contradiction, litotes produce non-eliminating negation, paranomasia disrupts the standard of univocal language and so forth. Pathologies of logic point to the “inside” of imagination from the outside—although I will argue in Chapter 2 that collapses of use and mention are a kind of illogic that is uncertainly claimed as any form of understanding, classically logical or otherwise. Tropes that modify their own meta-language introduce a discontinuity that poet and critic must interpret, each in her own way. The emphasis here, as elsewhere in my study, is on the distinction between an “index” of power and a figure of power: reflexive figures do not intelligibly figure their power—they point to it through discontinuity. Whether or not imagination is a form of understanding and desire is a theoretical question, but when the poet indexes that form (or narrates an account from “inside” of apocalyptic imagination),

introduces a formal problem of fictive standpoints (“inside” and “outside”), and how they entangle.

In a very different mode, we find Paul de Man saying that “act and interpretation are connected in a...complex and often contradictory manner,” and that “For Wordsworth, there is no historical eschatology, but rather, only a never-ending reflection upon an eschatological moment that has failed through *the excess of its interiority*” [my italics] (59). “Inside” here is the realm of an “act” and “outside” is the realm of interpretation—but they do not coincide as “consciousness.” The passage of “imagination” from “active to...interpretive stage” is an index of positional power—situated by de Man in reading the crossing-the-Alps passage of *The Prelude* (58-59).

CHAPTER 2

URIZEN'S CHILDREN AND THE LEECH GATHERER

1. Self-Reference

This chapter examines Romantic imagination as a self-referential power that puts a hole in cognition, coming across as something other than a form of desire, thought or experience. In its self-referential aspect, imagination points to itself through incomprehensible entities, such as Wordsworth's Leech Gatherer in "Resolution and Independence," or Urizen's ruined children in Blake's *The Four Zoas*. Imagination collapses literal and figural levels, precipitating an entity that incarnates the "logic" of a figure as its ontological state. The Leech Gatherer, for example, is "not all alive, nor dead," and Urizen's children are caught, suffering, between humanity and inhuman Nature—in both cases, reifying visionary power as an uncanny or incomprehensible spectacle.

In *Personification and the Sublime*, Steven Knapp notes:

Wordsworth's partially allegorized agents draw attention to the imagination's impulse to allegorize; more exactly, the impulse to allegorize is made noticeable by its curious inappropriateness to the agents to which it is applied. *Precisely the discrepancy between the agent's natural status and its sudden acquisition of quasi-allegorical resonance thus becomes, for Wordsworth, a formal index of imaginative power.* [my italics] (106)

As a "real" being of the same order of reality as the narrator or poet, the Leech Gatherer resists allegorical meaning—and this all the more highlights an impulse

to read him allegorically. The personifying impulse puts the old man, as a figural agent, in representational space with the speaker of the poem, who is ostensibly real. This “impulse” to collapse literal and figural levels is unassimilable to a personal faculty of the mind. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a host of entities incongruously concretize figurality, staging a linguistic turn through which language encounters its own power in negative form. Such entities include Blake’s Adam (in his painting, *The Elohim Creating Adam*), Urizen’s children and Wordsworth’s borderers; the visionary ruin of Wordsworth’s London in its vast and indecorous cacophony; peculiar monsters of metaphysics, such as the Cartesian vortex that Blake parodied in *The Four Zoas*; and those mathematical objects, such as infinitesimals and imaginary numbers, that had no referent in empirical reality, and seemed to incarnate pathologies of reason.

What do the Leech Gatherer, Urizen’s children and imaginary numbers have in common? These entities incarnate the antithetical logic of figures as their ontological state or their “meaning.” Coleridge’s imagination reconciles opposites (and by implication, contradiction), but Wordsworth’s Leech Gatherer *exists* between life and death—“out there” in the landscape where the narrator encounters him. From the narrator’s standpoint, the “logic” of metaphor—translated as “not all alive nor dead”—is now the ontological state of a thing.

2. Reflection vs. Self-Reference

Inasmuch as imagination mirrors its power back to us comprehensibly, the mind reflects on it, and “reflexivity” is *reflexio* (“bending back”). In the above example, however, language folds on itself in self-reference, pointing to its own power in a way that interrupts reflection. In contrast, we can consider Akenside’s version of Genesis from *Pleasures of the Imagination*, in which God’s creativity is the very form of His thought and desire. Akenside’s God views uncreated images akin to Platonic forms, “deep retired/In his unfathomed essence,” and then his “vital smile” unfolds them into being:

...Ere the radiant sun

Sprung from the East, or ‘mid the vault of night

The moon suspended her serener lamp;
 Ere mountains, woods, or streams adorned the globe,
 Or Wisdom taught the sons of men her lore;
 Then lived the Eternal one: then, deep retired
 In his unfathomed essence, viewed at large
 The uncreated images of things;
 The radiant sun, the moon’s nocturnal lamp,
 The mountains, woods, and streams, the rolling globe,
 And Wisdom’s form celestial. From the first
 Of days on them his divine love he fixed,
 His admiration; till in time complete,
 What he admired and loved, his vital smile
 Unfolded into being. Hence the breath
 Of life informing each organic frame... (93)

Akenside’s description elides the moment of performative logos—which would be a self-referential moment because the *fiat* (“Let there be light”) does what it decrees. He bypasses the disruptive sublimity of autonomous creative power for

the beauty of reflection and sympathetic imagination. His version of Genesis differs from the Bible, where: “God saw everything that he had made, /and behold, it was very good.” Akenside’s God saw that it was good *before* the creation unfolded, by first reflecting on his own ideas. The creation is a self-reinforcing image from the beginning, so much so that God could never have created the world and flinched backward from it-- seeing “that it was bad.” God is in harmony with his creation, and Akenside will extend this harmony to the relation between humanity and Nature through the metaphor of Memnon’s stone harp--the basis of the Romantic Aeolian harp. This harmony between humanity and Nature mirrors the harmony of God with His creation: Akenside’s God smiles his creation into being. In Blake’s poem, “The Tyger,” by contrast, the voice of Experience wonders: “*did he smile his work to see?*”

In “The Elohim Creating Adam,” William Blake depicts a seemingly stunned deity, hovering over an Adam who is suffocated by the serpent coils of historical and natural cycles—cycles that parody the exhaustion and renewal of visionary creativity. In his stricken facial expression, Adam reflects the Elohim, but in the darkened mirror of creation, the creator seems unable to read Adam as an entity made in his own image. Akenside says of God creating nature: “What he admired and loved, his vital smile/Unfolded into being.” Instead, the Elohim stares intently but blankly out of frame, sensing the insistence of his own power in alien

form. We might imagine that this parodic creation obstructs authentic power, which shoots sinister rays in the background of the picture, mimicked by the raised hair of the Elohim. Power englobes into a sun or circle behind the Elohim—a sinister contraction in Blake’s myth. The sun encompasses the Elohim with its outline, as a circle encloses the creator in Blake’s painting the Ancient of Days.

In this scene, there is no representation of authentic power, only a gnostic “contraction” of it, or a defense against it. From our limited perspective as spectators, there was already defense against power from the beginning, before there was anything to defend against—defense is the only “creation” we see. The clay that the Elohim gathers in his left hand catachrestically yokes spirit and flesh, and Adam, splayed backward in a crucifixion pose, suffers this identification literally, as a physical symptom. Adam is a thing with the contradictory “logic” of a figure, yoking opposites through his fallen state rather than through imaginative or figural agency. The power that created Adam is not assimilable to the Elohim’s conscious will: it is a power of materialization that surprises the Elohim, much as Urizen is “suprized” by the Tree of Mystery that sparks beneath his heel, roofing him over with branches in *The Four Zoas*.

In “Resolution and Independence,” William Wordsworth fashioned an image that we can juxtapose with Blake’s. Wordsworth’s narrator “espies” an old Leech Gatherer bent over a brackish pond, stirring the water to disturb leeches. As in the

case of the Elohim, the old man looks past his reflection to read something, and “fixedly did look”:

At length, himself unsettling, he the pond
 Stirred with his staff, and fixedly did look
 Upon the muddy water, which he conned,
 As if he had been reading in a book: (85-88, N 399)

What the old man tries to con, according to Steven Knapp, is a “miniaturized” image of himself in the form of wriggling leeches. This disconnection between self and self-image (man and leech) signals imagination, both in the case of Leech Gatherer reading his image, and in the case of the narrator trying to read the Leech Gatherer as an emblem of resolution and independence. Wordsworth’s old man stirs the water, and in so doing, disturbs his reflection—“himself unsettling.” Reading unsettles the old man, suggesting an allegory of the narrator’s own difficulties; the Leech Gatherer is not easily interpreted because he is not so much a figure as an entity with the logic and agency of a figure—as though figurality had turned inside out.

Figurality seems to fold on itself, trying to grasp its agency through literalized or ruined figures, which are “ruined” in the double sense of being literalized metaphors or catachrestically yoked opposites on one hand, and ruined human shapes on the other hand, shattered into uncanny and incomprehensible modes of agency—“dishumanizd men” as William Blake puts it in Night Six of *The Four Zoas*. This is a reflexive turn in which the mind encounters imagination

as negatively sublime—a “turning round as with the might of waters” in Wordsworth’s formulation, that precipitates bent and abstracted figures, charged with a power of admonishment. In taking such shapes, human ruins signify a power of the imagination that resists meaning.

We might imagine that a “ruined figure” collapses two meanings: that of a ruined figurality, readable as literalized or even “bad” metaphoricity, and a ruined humanity, “dehumanized” or deprived of the figural unity that would otherwise coalesce it. The conceit here is that literalization would be borne as a ruined state—in the mode of Blake’s Adam for example, who yokes matter and spirit, but also, in the manner of Wordsworth’s old man, who incarnates a suspension of life and death. To achieve this conceit, Wordsworth employs a famous simile:

As a huge Stone is sometimes seen to lie
Couch’d on the bald top of an eminence;
Wonder to all who do the same espy
By what means it could thither come and whence;
So that it seems a thing endued with sense:
Like a Sea-beast crawl’d forth, which on a shelf
Of rock or sand repositeth, there to sun itself.

Such seem’d this Man, not all alive nor dead (N, 399)

In his 1815 preface to *Poems*, Wordsworth invokes the imaginative “assimilation” of stone and sea beast, and the subsequent “coalescence” or “unity” of this “intermediate image” with the Leech Gatherer. The epic simile “coalesces” stone and sea beast—but the speaker of “Resolution and Independence” does not

encounter a simile when walking through the landscape, he encounters the Leech Gatherer. In his preface, Wordsworth invokes an agency (“coalescence,” “unity,” “assimilation”) that can reconcile opposites, and the reader ostensibly experiences that. Within the poem’s narrative there is there is disorientation and mystery surrounding this agency, reified “out there” in the landscape—and the narrator experiences this. The poem turns the imagination inside out by incarnating its amphibious hovering—an event that happens in the blank space of the stanza break between lines 70-71, where the coalescing power of the simile hangs, reifying itself as the old man’s state—“not all alive nor dead.”

In encountering the old man, the narrator encounters the poetic agency that mediates his own narrative reflection; i.e., he encounters the drive of meter and metaphor. This is a more formal narrator than the one conflated with the historical Wordsworth, but there is precedent for reading him this way. Steven Knapp sees the narrator struggling to understand the momentum of the Spenserian stanza, the medium of his own lyric reflection, now faced from the “outside” through the rhythms of the old Leech Gatherer’s speech. Both the impulse of meter and the impulse to allegorize insist as negative powers, so that “the imagination itself, as it operates on a figure like the Leech-Gatherer, is not so much a faculty of the individual mind as it is a recurrent pattern of attention and oblivion...produced by the agency of poetic form” (121).

3. *Urizen's Children*

“Attention and oblivion” refers to the narrator’s famously distracted questioning of the Leech Gatherer, but it could also describe the mode of repeated questions in Shelley’s “The Triumph of Life” (“But what is life?”) or Blake’s prophecies—patterns that might be taken, in one way or another, as produced by an “agency of poetic form” impinging on a lyric subject, fictive self or Blakean selfhood as a hole in cognition. In the *The Four Zoas*, Urizen interrogates suffering and terrible agencies of nature which return his own “obstructed powers” in traumatic form. His repeated questions and inability to get an answer result from the fact that he has “forgotten” a power of sympathetic imagination that would ground his apostrophe to the inanimate world. The fact that he *partially* retains his powers accounts for his ability to corral inanimate objects at all—and thus, there is wavering between “attention and oblivion” here too:

Then he beheld the forms of tygers & of Lions dishumanized men
 Many in serpents & in worms stretchd out enormous length
 Over the sullen mould & slimy tracks obstruct his way
 Drawn out from deep to deep woven by ribbed
 And scaled monsters or armd in iron shell or shell of brass
 Or gold a glittering torment shining & hissing in eternal pain
 Some columns of fire or of water sometimes stretchd out in heighth
 Sometimes in length sometimes englobing wandering in vain seeking for
 ease
 His voice to them was but an inarticulate thunder for their Ears
 Were heavy & dull & their eyes and nostrils closd up
 Oft he stood by a howling victim Questioning in words
 Soothing or Furious no one answered every one wrapd up
 In his own sorrow howld regardless of his words, nor voice

Of sweet response could he obtain tho oft assayd with tears
 He knew they were his Children ruind in his ruind world
 Oft would he stand and question a fierce scorpion glowing with gold
 In vain the terror heard not. then a lion he would Sieze
 By the fierce mane staying his howling course in vain the voice
 Of Urizen in vain the Eloquent tongue. A Rock a Cloud a Mountain
 Were now not Vocal as in Climes of happy Eternity
 Where the lamb replies to the infant voice & the lion to the man of years
 Giving them sweet instructions Where the Cloud the River & the Field
 Talk with the husbandman & shepherd But these attacked him sore
 Siezing upon his feet & rending the Sinews that in Caves
 He hid to recure his obstructed powers with rest & oblivion (70:31-45, 71:
 1-10, E 340-41)

Urizen's repeated questioning of his children recalls the speaker in Wordsworth's
 "Resolution and Independence," questioning the old Leech Gatherer:

- His voice to them was but an inarticulate thunder...
- Oft he stood by a howling victim Questioning...
- Oft would he stand and question...

Through the old Leech Gatherer, Wordsworth's speaker encounters the poetic
 medium of his own narration as a stream of sound that he cannot understand. A
 self-referential impasse also afflicts Urizen: he faces his wayward desire in facing
 his wayward children--or at least the visionary form of his desire-- as speech and
 images that exceed sense.

Bracketing, for the moment, the many reasons to keep Blake and
 Wordsworth apart, here is common ground: Urizen's children are Blakean analogs
 of Wordsworth's "borderers," who incarnate the "amphibious" logic of figural

imagination by appearing to suspend life and death. Urizen's children externalize visionary energy in perversely reified form; i.e., they externalize tropological transformations as metamorphoses, or incarnate the "motions" of figurality as strange physical motions. For example, what would an incarnated synecdoche look like? Maybe a synecdoche would "move" like a cloud that "moveth all together if it move at all," as Wordsworth's narrator describes the Leech Gatherer. Urizen beholds his children from a similarly strange angle:

Some columns of fire or of water sometimes stretchd out in heighth
 Sometimes in length sometimes englobing wandering in vain seeking
 for ease (70:36-37, E 340)

Urizen's children suffer metaphoricity as "englobing," and their "shining & hissing" substantializes "glittering torment" — as though we, along with Urizen, were passively viewing the agency of metaphor as an external and monstrously reified phenomenon. Alternately, they embody sublime effects, as Vincent de Luca has noted in Night Six of *The Four Zoas*: "The 'dishumanized' men...undergo (as serpents) the experience of incorporating the infinite within the self ('stretched out enormous length'), or they attain 'height'" (E, 30-31).

Urizen's children stage an encounter with visionary power through images that smite the eye. In return, Urizen signals the awesomeness of his power through an opacity of speech: "his voice to them was like inarticulate thunder." The Leech Gatherer also manifests visionary power through images and speech that exceed

understanding, and in this sense, power signals itself through the subject's failure to picture or comprehend—it is negatively sublime. This kind of power hints at a dimension of imagination beyond the human—terribly divine, or externalized like “The law of things which lie/Beyond the reach of human will or power,/The life of nature...” (11.97-99, 1805, W 470). For Blake however, the negative dimension of power (negative in the sense of incurring “oblivion”) is an effect of the mind grasping its own power in rational terms that deform it. The speaker blames the fall of language on Urizen's “obstructed powers,” but “obstruction” is also *production*, rolling out the zodiac whose glowing scorpion Urizen interrogates in vain. The self-reference is explicit: when Urizen struggles with his children he cannot prevail because “*himself was Subject*”:

He saw them cursed beyond his Curse his soul melted with fear
 He could not take their fetters off for they grew from the soul
 Nor could he quench the fires for they flamd out from the heart
 Nor could he calm the elements for himself was Subject (70 (second
 portion): 47, 71 (second portion): 48-50, E 341)

The Urizenic-Lockean subject is subject to his own fetters: when he tries to purify an objective standpoint, the entanglement of subject-object resists, and reifies itself as an *external* resistance. Urizen reifies the externality that he struggles to control by struggling to control it. Blake's narrator describes “fetters” to be taken off, fires to be quenched, or warring elements to be calmed, and these figures are exactly

what Urizen materializes by his very struggles—the narrator’s metaphorical description slides into mythical description, staging an incongruous reification.

In the above lines from *The Four Zoas*, the narrative description can be taken figurally—or as literal description of metamorphosis. I will examine this formal effect more closely in the conclusion of this chapter and in Chapter 2, but here it is worth noting that there is not, in Blake’s myth, a total collapse of the figural and literal distinction, as Steven Knapp has claimed (6). Rather, there is a “discrepancy” or “disparity” that signals the sublime—between rhetorical figures and descriptions of dire changes. In Blake’s description of Urizen’s children, figures are subtly, but discretely, slipping into metaphorphic images (and vice versa). Alternately, figures of change blur into descriptions of change, or as Vincent de Luca has suggested, tropes turn into metamorphic beings (in a double-sense of tropological turning and “turning into” (75)). Inasmuch as this “turning” registers as an effect, it signifies a strange and incomprehensible power.

The gloomy wonder of the fall is that visionary power, as a form of desire and experience, keeps turning “outside” as the spectacle of an illegible and exterior nature whose parodic creativity is a perversion of energy (Tharmas) and imagination (Los)—or a veiling of power (Vala). Visionary power “contracts” to precipitate the spectacle of amphibious images, and their effect is different than those of Wordsworth. As we will see when we examine Wordsworth’s famous

simile of stone and sea beast, he worked hard to effect a figural “reconciliation” of animacy and inanimacy in the Leech Gatherer. Blake’s “borderers” give no hint of reconciliation. Instead, they convey incarnated contradiction: they echo the chimeras and freaks of Milton’s chaos and the “similes unlike” of Pope. Urizen’s children are caught howling between animate and inanimate—“their outward forms were in the abyss.” There is, however, sublimity in their “glittering torment,” and Blake’s catalog feeds on it.

We can read Urizen’s encounter with his children as a specular encounter with visionary power—or what the present study would consider more narrowly as the power to construct figures. “In Climes of Happy Eternity,” Urizen had grounded his power of address in an identification with the inanimate world, but now, in the fallen world, that power has externalized before him as spectacle: Urizen’s children suffer a contradiction implicit in metaphorical identity. In unfallen identification with “A Rock a Cloud a Mountain,” Urizen would experience these objects as humanized, even as they remain “other,” but his children parody this identification, by suffering reptilization, yet remaining themselves (“he knew they were his children...”).

In *The Offense of Poetry*, Hazard Adams draws in part on Blake’s sense of identity to state that “Identity is not sameness but *relation*, in which sameness and difference coexist. Identity accounts for the great use in poetry of the trope of

apostrophe” (143). In Urizen’s encounter with his children, metaphor is not a simultaneous assertion of the same and the different, grounding an apostrophe that would vocalize nature. Rather, this vocative power now impinges on Urizen through the *spectacle* of “amphibians” or “borderers”—creatures who are neither this nor that (or both), parodying the metaphorical assertion of the same and the different. Adams invokes a standpoint *inside* of metaphorical form, albeit by speaking about it from the *outside*—an ironic standpoint, since it is impossible to simultaneously use and mention metaphor. Blake’s speaker similarly puts us outside of Urizen’s unfallen powers of address and identity by looking back on a golden age of sympathetic imagination in which “a rock a cloud and a mountain” were vocal; i.e., when Urizen shared discursive space with inanimate objects, even as they retained their alterity. The reflexive attempt of language to grasp its own power from the outside is also implicit in Urizen’s obsessional drive to externalize and control power, whereupon it redounds upon him as incomprehensible phenomena of Nature.

Urizen can sense the intimacy of these exterior terrors: “He knew they were his Children, ruind in his ruind world.” He beholds his children as monstrously suffering, and there emerge, against the background chaos, sublime terrors of the abyss—a glowing scorpion and a howling lion that are partly humanized figures of the zodiac. Urizen retains enough of his obstructed powers to “sieve” these figures;

i.e., his children are not entirely assimilated into the inanimate world. Monstrously caught between humanity and nature, they parody the visionary humanization of nature described at the close of *Jerusalem*: “All human forms identified even tree metal earth & stone.” “Human forms” is in tension with the inhuman connotations of “tree metal earth & stone” as a contradiction internal to vision--as the “otherness” of visionary identity, and the basis of its dynamism. It is this alterity that the ruined inhabitants of earth encounter reflexively —“scar’d of their own sigh.”

Urizen’s sons are unresponsive in the depths of the fall, but in the Last Judgement, they are agents of his desire, and by extension, serve the desire of an integrated humanity in which Urizen functions. In Night IX of *The Four Zoas*, for example, the Eternal Man instructs the sons of Urizen to gather the vintage “with sharp hooks,” consummating revolutionary ideals in a figuratively bloody apocalypse, rather than literal bloodshed. Blake’s description of the bloody winepress cannot help but suggest the real horror of the French Revolution. Yet Luvah describes unfallen Urizen as the “faith” that sustains vision, and his sons are a visionary form of creative destruction. In the throes of the fall, however, Urizen’s children are forces of reification. Under Urizen’s command, his sons helped build the “Mundane shell” of the material world--they “weighed and order’d all”—but now, abstract parameters of measurement (“Heighth” and “length”) are bleeding

into their ontological state: they are “stretched out in heighth/sometimes in length” as if stretched on a rack. Whatever it feels like to be “inside” of imagination, Blake presents an outside standpoint in the spectacle of Urizen’s children. From the “outside,” imagination acts as a power of reptilization and materialization, creating monsters “out there” who catachrestically yoke animacy and inanimacy. Urizen *passively observes* these transformations as though they were literal. Visionary power returns as spectacle, resisting Urizen’s control—resisting a rational dichotomy of inside and outside that would allow Urizen to instrumentalize and enslave his children, treating them as objects with a separate existence.

More fundamentally, power cannot grasp *itself* as something external. Blake describes this failed self-grasping through Urizen’s rejection of his emanation Ahania—the event that causes his children to flee. As a masculine principle or personality, creativity expresses its production through a female “emanation,” which also provides sensual food and a place of repose. The danger is that repose would turn into a fatal “contraction” of visionary power, pulling imagination into passive fascination with its own materialized production. Jacob Boehme influences this myth when he describes Adam going with his spirit into substantiality and becoming captivated by it: “Now when Adam’s hunger was set after the earthliness, it did, by its magnetic power, impress into his fair image the vanity of evil and good; whereupon the heavenly image of the angelical world’s

essence did disappear; as if a man should insinuate some strange matter into a burning and light-shining candle, whereby it should become dark and at last wholly extinguish” (19.3, 129).

For Blake, the fall into “substantiality” is the abstraction of an outside world from the visionary (tropological) identity of inside and outside. Blake’s myth thematizes unfallen identity as a relation between active-masculine and passive-feminine contraries—and this also echoes Boehme’s account of an unfallen relation: “The fiery dark-world rejoiced in the holy light-world, and the light-world in the outward [world], as in its manifestation. Again, the outward world joyed itself in both the inward worlds; as in its life...” (17.18, 115). In Blake’s myth, “rejoicing” figures an unfallen eroticism; a dynamical, *figural* relation between the “fiery” and its outward manifestation, that falls when the manifestation assumes its own will and desire. Boehme writes of Adam: “He was a fire-spark of God’s might. But when he was formed into a creatural being of the creatures, he withdrew into self-lust, and broke himself off from the universal being, and entered into a self-fullness” (17.42, 120).

Boehme’s reflexive formulations are fundamental to Blake’s myth. When visionary power grasps a fragment of itself as “external,” it meets resistance—just as Urizen meets resistance by grasping and questioning figures of the zodiac. The

bind is self-referential: what Blake will later call “selfhood” (via Boehme) emerges in passing from 1 to 2 below:

1. I-am-myself-and-other
2. I am myself

For Boehme, “Adam was a man and also a woman, and yet none of them [distinct]” (18.2, 121), and for Blake, this not a mystical doctrine but a “logic” of visionary form, lived as a form of being and desire. I have reduced this scenario as #1 above. Conversely, the abstraction of self from other is a foreclosure of visionary power, since there is no separate “selfhood” in the “logic” of #1.

These preliminaries set up Urizen’s rejection of his emanation, Ahania—the event that causes Urizen’s children to flee. Urizen’s relation to Ahania is the relation of reason to sensuality, but in the depths of the fall, Urizen would purify reason by rejecting her:

Shall the feminine indolent bliss, the indulgent self of weariness,
The passive idle sleep, the enormous night & darkness of Death
Set herself up to give her laws to the active masculine virtue?
Thou little diminutive portion that dar’st be a counterpart!
Thy passivity, thy laws of obedience and insincerity,
Are my abhorrence. Wherefore hast thou taken that fair form?
Whence is this power given to thee? Once thou wast in my breast
A sluggish current of dim waters, on whose verdant margin
A cavern shagg’d with horrid shades, dark, cool and deadly, where
I laid my head in the hot noon after the broken clods
Had wearied me: there I laid my plow, & there my horses fed.
And thou hast risen with thy moist locks into a wat’ry image
Reflecting all my indolence my weakness and my death,
To weigh me down beneath the grave into non Entity (43: 6-19,
E 322)

Urizen represses Ahanian, and her sensual-sexual pull of cyclical sleep. As Urizen describes her, Ahanian is a phase where rational sense gives way to sensual sense; the logical instrument of reason (*organon*) disappears into an organic and bodily cyclicity. Reason gives way to figural transfers and poly-vocal echoes in the “horrid shades” of the skull-cave, and Urizen views this sexual-somnabulistic energy (“sluggish current of dim waters”) as sinister rather than recuperative. He realizes that sleep once was necessary (“in the hot noon after the broken clods/Had wearied me”), but Ahanian’s sleep now seems like a dangerous contraction of power. Urizen substantializes Ahanian as a “diminutive portion,” thereby splitting their dynamical unity, but he claims the opposite; i.e., that Ahanian is substantializing herself. She was in his breast as the place spirit of “a sluggish current of dim waters” on whose verdant bank he had rested, but now “thou hast risen” as a “wat’ry image.” This movement from inside to outside is substantialization—or a malign literalization-effect.

Urizen’s misgivings recall Jacob Boehme’s reading of Genesis, in which the fall into materialism was Adam’s fall into carnality and sleep. But the pastoral place where Urizen sleeps is a place where language recycles itself: a nodal point at “hot noon” where he rests (“there I laid my plow”), and awakens to renewed labor. Noon is a cyclical clock-position that poses risk—elsewhere in *The Four Zoas* we are told that Vala seduced the Eternal Man at “high noon,” and contracted

his visionary senses. At noon, the figuralizing aspect of visionary power contracts, reifying externality to a precarious extent. There could be an expansion into renewed vision, or a checked expansion that Harold Bloom has called a “checked breath”--an expansion catching itself in self-reference and doubling back, reifying its own production, and getting stuck.

Unfallen language recycles its form through a nodal point where dead and living metaphor, literal and figural, outward-pointing and inward-creating language collapses, and Ahanian will bear this discontinuous self-intersection as death from which language emerges renewed. Near the end of the *Four Zoas*, Ahanian dies at the moment when she unites with a repentant and regenerated Urizen:

...Ahanian rose in joy
Excess of Joy is worse than grief—her heart beat high her blood
Burst its bright Vessels She fell down dead at the feet of Urizen
Outstretchd a Smiling corse... (121: 35-38, E 376)

If Urizen and Ahanian were to embrace as separate selfhoods, it would threaten a mirror-scene in which visionary power tries to grasp itself as a narcissistic image. A version of this pathological scene occurs in *The Book of Urizen*, when Los and Enitharmon horrify the Eternals by sexually embracing: “Man begetting his likeness,/On his own divided image.” The mirror-scene is static, sterile and substantializing. Divided vision cannot reunify through the sexual act since the sexes are (for Blake) the very symptom of that division. Through her death, Ahanian allows language to pass through itself dynamically, so that it is *self-devouring*, *self-*

renewing and *self-recycling*--passing continuously from figural to literal and back, without getting stuck in mirrors, self-pointing or self-grasping:

...bright Ahanian shall awake from death
 A glorious Vision to thine Eyes a Self renewing Vision
 The spring. the summer to be thine then sleep the wintry days
 In silken garments spun by her own hands against her funeral
 (122:6-9, E 376)

Visionary power cycles through forms on the model of Natural cycles, so that it never doubles back on itself, grasping itself materially, or getting stuck in mirrors. In its passive phase, power is dangerously reifying, in the sense that the sympathetic identity of inside and outside gives way to the passive sight of an outside world. The danger of reification is that the “self-renewing” of visionary forms freezes, and what takes over is a sinister impulse to substantialize and control production as an “externality.” Described through the meta-language of myth, Blakean metaphorical imagination passes through a nodal point of non-metaphorical “passivity” in which the sense of an outside world predominates—and back into a sympathetically metaphorical identification of outside and inside again. It is a risky passage in which productive power might freeze itself in substantialization, becoming other to itself. “Self-renewing vision” tropes the creative destruction of visionary power--the paradoxical point at which language recycles itself and safely passes through the dangers of paradoxical self-reference.

In the *Four Zoas*, Ahania creates a space where visionary power enters a passive phase, reifying an “outside” world without falling into the abyss of absolute reification. This is a tricky distinction that will ultimately fail to hold, triggering the fall in one version of the story offered in *The Four Zoas*. In the myth of Ahania, passively “sleeping” vision projects the verdant river bank and the cave. Slumbering powers recuperate, awakening to a “self-renewing vision.” In parallel with this scene, emanations die, are renewed as visionary form, die, and renew themselves again, and these cycles implicitly express Urizen’s expanding and contracting powers, which move from visionary identity to a more passive and externalizing mode and back. These cycles, modelled on natural cycles, are readable as the passage from dead to living form—dead to living *metaphor*, inasmuch as the form of desire, experience and thought is sympathetically metaphorical. Metaphor in this sense, is a form of desire and inseparable from the passion that motivates sympathetic imagination; it grounds a self-annihilating and visionary mode of address.

Nonetheless, Blake’s myth is not an illustration of doctrine: it stages the problem of embodied metaphor rather than merely telling a story about it. Ahania poses the problem of embodied metaphor when we get the sense that her death is not just an allegory of renewed visionary power but retains something of the trauma of a real death. Urizen wept when Ahania dropped dead, and the Eternal

Man “Darkend with sorrow.” There is strangeness in the speaker’s depiction of the emanation effectively sewing her own winding cloth. Because they manifest the destruction and renewal of visionary form, the emanations are entities who are “but for a time, & who pass away in winter” (287), just as all form must pass away, and be renewed. In this sense, the emanations are close to personifications—but acquire a more three-dimensional awareness when they feel threatened. For a certain reader, they may acquire a certain humanity when we see them about to disappear into the dynamic and apocalyptic form of eternity.

It is here that Blake’s myth becomes formally strange. There are moments in Blake’s prophecies when the emanations protest, becoming something more than personifications of visionary output, and what are we to make of this? In *Milton* the emanations complain: “Give us a habitation & a place/In which we may be hidden under the shadow of wings” (287). That place is the “pleasant shadow” called “Beulah,” where the fall might have been triggered in the *Four Zoas*. The emanations should function as personified visionary production—they should not be “aware” of their deaths as anything but visionary renewal, nor become substantialized in their existential anxiety. Yet, Enitharmon does become self-aware in this way at the end of *Jerusalem*, as Hazard Adams has noted in *The Offense of Poetry*:

We learn toward the end of the poem that one of
the story’s principal characters, Enitharmon, knows

that she is in a poem, for as the climax of *Jerusalem* approaches she remarks that the poem is about to end. It is not clear whether she fears for her existence because of this or is concerned about maintaining her fallen alienated selfhood when Albion awakens. Probably both. No matter which, she is in error on this point, for she remains eternal in the poem, her world, whenever it is read. (173)

When Urizen rejects Ahania, he represses a sympathetic power of address grounded in a metaphorical form of desire: he posits his children as alien and exterior phenomena. That he can address or recognize them at all is evidence that he retains something of a half-oblivious memory of “Golden Climes”—but the repressed energy of his address takes the form of a Yahweh-like noise from the standpoint of the addressee: “His voice to them was but an inarticulate thunder for their Ears/were heavy & dull & their eyes and nostrils closd up” (70:39-40, E, 340-41). The symptom bleeds into Urizen’s world, and its inhabitants: “Scar’d at the sound of their own sigh that seems to shake the immense...” (70: 7, E 340).

The closed-up senses of Urizen’s children are Urizen’s own closed-up senses, contracted by his rejection of Ahania. As figures of the zodiac (lion, tyger, scorpion) the outward forms of his children are “in the abyss”:

The eyelids expansive as morning & the Ears
 As a golden ascent winding round to the heavens of heavens
 Within the dark horrors of the Abysses lion or tyger or scorpion
 For every one opend within into Eternity at will
 But they refusd because their outward forms were in the Abyss
 (73:37-39, 74:1-2, E 343-44)

They refused apocalypse because they are fragments of visionary creativity clinging to the outward form of its creation. The “Ears ” open inward “into Eternity” as hearing mediated by poetic form, spiraling upward like Jacob’s ladder, but Urizen’s children are unwilling to surrender outward corporeal sensation—they contracted their ears and eyelids, further materializing their outward forms.

This refusal of apocalypse is also the refusal of Blake’s reader, looking up at the night sky, where wonders of the abyss admonish her from afar. Self-referential or self-conscious imagination poses the problem of figurality trying to grasp itself in literal form, arresting visionary dynamism. The Blakean “borderer” or “amphibian” is the symptom of this self-grasping: entities that signify visionary-poetic agency as an external and inhuman power.

4. “*Resolution and Independence*”

“Resolution and Independence” opens with descriptive personifications that figure nature folding on herself in echoes and reflections: the sky “rejoices in the morning’s birth,” the Hare’s feet raise a mist that “Runs with her all the way...” and the Stock-dove’s auto-affection mimics the procreative brooding of the Miltonic God (“Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove broods”) (1-14, N 397). The poet seems within nature’s circuit of call and response inasmuch as his present joy motivates the first two stanzas.

Abruptly, the poem cuts from present to past tense, introducing a lyric “I.”

The poet now views present joy from the outside by reflecting on a past self:

I was a traveler then upon the moor,
I saw the hare that raced about with joy;
I heard the woods and distant waters roar;
Or heard them not, as happy as a Boy...
(15-18, N 398)

The anaphora locates an “I” among creatures who respond unselfconsciously to nature, but unlike those creatures, the speaker uses simile: “And I bethought me of the playful hare:/Even such a happy Child of earth am I...” (30-31, N 398). Self-consciousness is marked by a disjunction, used to describe a state that bypasses conscious sensation: “I heard the woods...or heard them not” (18, N 398). This disjunction recalls the language of “The Old Cumberland Beggar.” In that poem, the speaker asks that the beggar have the melody of birds around him “whether heard or not”—a formulation that preserves the opacity of the beggar’s inner life by keeping the speaker’s standpoint outside of it. Moreover, lines 15-18 rephrase previous lines of poetry as if translating from the outside, reducing and even garbling them. Line 17 seems to disrupt an echo figure: “I heard the woods and distant waters roar” makes it seem as if the woods are not so much echoing the waters as roaring on their own, or resisting the muting distance established in the first stanza (“The birds are singing in the *distant* woods”).

In addition, the waters did not “roar” in line 7; rather, there was a pleasant noise of waters suffusing “all the air”: “And all the air is fill’d with pleasant noise of waters” (7, N 397).

This is the Biblical noise of many waters—God’s voice softened as the voice of the air, albeit retaining its incomprehensible equivocation, since water is a noncount noun and “waters” poses the peculiarity of difference as indifference. This line recalls Dorothy Wordsworth’s journal entry of April 29, 1802:

“...William and I lay in the trench under the fence—he with his eyes shut and listening to the waterfalls and the birds. There was no one waterfall above another—it was a sound of waters in the air, the voice of the air.” (311)

In her journal entry, Dorothy reports Wordsworth’s response as he lies in the trench: “That it would be as sweet thus to lie so in the grave to hear the *peaceful* sounds of the earth and just to know that one’s dear friends were near” (311).

Wordsworth needs to know that friends are near, but the earth would not need to hear something other than its own peaceful sounds. Otherwise put: Nature folds on herself, recognizing herself in her echoes and reflections, but this is a rhetorical standpoint whose impossibility and artifice recall, with a shift of imagery and meter, a Spenserian twist on the *Locus amoenus*—an enervating bower that reflects itself not because there is call and response in nature, but because nature is unnaturally entangled in art.

Compare the opening stanzas of “Resolution and Independence” to the Bower of Bliss in Book II, Canto *xii* of *The Faerie Queene*:

The joyous birdes shrouded in chearefull shade
 Their notes vnto the voice attempred sweet;
 The’ Angelicall soft trembling voices made
 To th’instruments diuine response meet:
 The siluer sounding instruments did meet
 With the base murmure of the waters fall:
 The waters fall with difference discreet,
 Now soft, now loud, vnto the wind did call:
 The gentle warbling wind low answered to all. (282)

The mirror of the central rhyme—“meet”-“meet”—places the Witch Arcasia’s music on either side of a call and response, harmonizing it with birds, water and wind. Why would Wordsworth draw on this imagery and meter? The poet identifies with the “blissful” creatures—“even as these blissful creatures do I fare”—and this recalls “Intimations of Immortality”: “Ye blessed creatures, I have heard the call/Ye to each other make...” However, there is a threat of excessive identification. Nature’s joy is autonomously posited and sustained by its circuits of call and response—a singular knowledge sustains it. This is a kind of enchantment, however, and the Spenserian bower figures it as somewhat sinister. If joy is the agency of nature’s echo and response and her self-sustaining drive, it is also a figure of figural agency, whose standpoint—if we could achieve it—would be oblivion. Perhaps as a providential protection, joy has an internal limit:

But, as it sometimes chanceth, from the might
 Of joy in minds that can no farther go,

As high as we have mounted in delight
 In our dejection do we sink as low... (22-25, N 398)

The symmetry of “no farther go...sink as low” signals something law-like in the onset of dejection, qualifying the symmetrical tropes of nature’s echo. Present joy had seemed an impulse to lyric expression, but after line 15, the bliss of creatures is distinct from the poet’s genial response because the latter does not sustain him:

My whole life I have liv’d in pleasant thought,
 As if life’s business were a summer mood;
 As if all needful things would come unsought
 To genial faith, still rich in genial good;
 But how can He expect that others should
 Build for him, sow for him, and at his call
 Love him, who for himself will take no heed at all? (36-42 N 398)

On line 40 the dactylic “Build for him, sow for him” breaks up the iambs, and a trochee opens the alexandrine. These are anxious, upbraiding beats, carrying a worry that might well be answered by Matthew 6:28: “And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the Lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin...” In the opening stanzas, a lyric impulse had found its metrical expression in iambic pentameter, but self-doubt breaks it up. The lily clothes itself, builds for itself, and does not need to know that friends are near. Its “genial faith” is the impulse to grow. Unlike the wildflower, the poet is conscious of clothing and depends on others to sow for him because his genial spirits do not sustain him like a natural drive.

The distinction is between a nature who recognizes herself through the self-reflecting agency of joy (the sun rises, the sky rejoices), and a speaker who can no longer recognize his own joy and creativity in the bliss of nature's creatures.

Unlike nature folding on itself, the lyric "I" encounters resistance when it reflects—the poet wants to experience the source of his own power as something meaningful and self-sustaining, but he can no longer do it (if he ever could). This is self-awareness is a check on a dangerously autonomous identification with power, for the speaker now turns to Chatterton, who ended in madness and death. When the speaker describes "Chatterton, the marvelous Boy," the iambic pentameter again breaks up into paired dactyls: "CHAT-ter-ton...MAR-vel-ous" on line 41 and "MOUN-tain-side...DE-i-fied" on line 47, the latter turning with the inner couplet into a flash of identification: "By our own spirits are we deified" (47, N 398). Inasmuch as "our own spirits" are "our own faculty," we draw on them in something of a "fanatical" identification with the negative presentation of reason—they make us godlike. Wordsworth's prior repetition of "genial" makes "our own spirits" sound like spirits of place. By its own genius a river or tree is deified, but *genii* are something "other" than individual spirits, being interchangeably constituted as modes of archaic power. With the inflection of "*genius loci*," the poet's genius is both personal and alien—both self and not-self. This "both-and" logic may have become a pathological mode of identification in Chatterton, who

transmitted the spirit of the fifteenth century as though he were literally transcribing it.

The yoking of “gladness” and “madness” (lines 48 and 49) now directly links “joy” to ruin. In the next stanza, “given,” “striven” and “driven” are all trochees, breaking up the meter with anxious beats that are nonetheless paired symmetrically:

Now, whether it were by peculiar grace,
A leading from above, a something given,
Yet it befell, that in this lonely place,
When up and down my fancy thus was driven,
And I with these untoward thoughts had striven,
I saw a man before me unawares;
The oldest man he seem'd that ever wore grey hairs (50-56, N-399)

The inner couplet “driven-striven” marks a turn from centripetal fancy (rapidity of association and mania) to centrifugal thought (fixation and excessive identification). The “up and down” movement of fancy already anticipates the pacing of the Leech Gatherer across the moors — “When *up and down* my fancy thus was driven...” (53, N 399)—and echoes a description of the Leech Gatherer from a previous draft: “Now I am seeking Leeches *up and down*” (45).

The narrator strives with what drives him, and in the Leech Gatherer he encounters that drive as an opaque image. It has been noted that “I saw a man before me unawares” reads as “I saw without awareness.” In striving with his angel, the narrator emerges wounded like Jacob inasmuch as what he receives is

something less than a providential blessing that would relieve his guilt and anxiety—something other than an emblem of “Resolution and Independence.” The speaker will find it impossible to completely identify with the Leech Gatherer as an emblem of elemental self-sufficiency; this despite the claim of the final Alexandrine of the poem—“God,” said I, “be my help...” etc. (Hartman calls it “that last rag-tag Alexandrine,” in which the meter is now riddled with awkward and uncertain beats).

In line 55 the poem folds on itself a second time with the appearance of the Leech Gatherer, although this time the self-referential turn seems less psychologized. The sudden appearance of the Leech Gatherer recalls the appearance of a first-person speaker in line 15, and suggests a reading in which the speaker, like the Leech Gatherer, appears as an effect of that turn: instead of an “I” that reflects, reflection precipitates the lyric “I” as its symptom. Otherwise put, the speaker, like the Leech Gatherer, is not reflecting upon himself in a psychological sense; rather, the speaker dramatizes a resistance to reflection—the poem’s resistance to folding on itself. Knapp takes a version of this latter route when he claims that what the speaker encounters in the person of the Leech Gatherer is the “materialized deposit of the stanzas that serve as the alien medium of the speaker’s meditation” (119). Here, the “stuff” of resistance is the very medium that supports the lyric “I” in its reflection, and although Knapp focuses on the “agency” of

meter, we should include the “impulse” to allegorize, the “agency” of imaginative operations such as “endowment and abstraction,” and the agency of figures.

Inasmuch as a fictive speaker faces these impulses and agencies, it is as if the poem had turned inside out to face its drives.

Along these lines, what drives the speaker’s “untoward thoughts” is what Thomas Weiskel in *The Romantic Sublime* called “the relentless agency of Spenserian stanza”—an observation that inspired Knapp’s reading. What would this agency look like if the speaker could get “outside” of it and face it? The premise here is that meter and metaphor mediate the speaker’s thought—but that the speaker-as-character-in-the-story might detach himself from his own poetic voice, encountering, in a self-referential turn, its metric and figural agency. Thematically, it as though the speaker were “outside” of his own thought, regarding its form. Formally, it is as though the poem were “looking at” its poetic form from a meta-level. In line 57, for example, Wordsworth employs the Spenserian archaism “espied” to achieve a perfectly regular line—“My course I stopped as soon as I espied...” Here, meter and diction flag “espied” as something other than ordinary “seeing.” “Espying” is not just poetically informed “seeing,” for what it sees is poetic agency. Whatever drives the speaker’s fancy now turns inside out in an emblematic freeze-frame whose centerpiece is the epic simile beginning at line 64 (and cited earlier in this chapter). The epic simile is a figural

form of seeing that sees the agency of figurality itself, reified as whatever deposited the stone atop the bald eminence. Wordsworth writes of these boulders (glacial erratics) elsewhere, presumably strewn--with an eye on Thomas Burnett—by catastrophe, but also by an inaugural violence of language, impinging on the Rambler as visionary spectacle.

Inside the diegesis, the speaker sees and hears the old man, encountering him in the landscape, while outside of the diegesis, narrative filters the old man's words metrically and metaphorically as reported speech. This disconnection produces sublime effects. The speaker describes the Old Man's lofty utterance as something "Such as grave Livers do in Scotland use"—but grave livers in Scotland do not use Spenserian stanza. In Steven Knapp's reading, the narrator faces the poetic agency that mediates his own narrative (or "thoughts"), in a sublimely self-referential effect. These "sublime" misrecognitions turn on a discrepancy between intra- and extra-diegetic levels, and the strangeness of their entanglement. The Leech Gatherer personifies poetic agency, but is only by entangling narrative levels that the speaker could encounter agency in the first place. Through this collapse of levels, the poem faces its "agencies," "forces" and "drives."

These considerations emerge more concretely when "The Old Man" no longer scans as three syllables: "And now, not knowing what the Old Man had said..." (124, N 400). "The old Man" should be pronounced as two syllables

(“Th’old man”) to maintain iambic pentameter in the line above—in the same way that “untoward” and “genial” should be pronounced elsewhere in the poem. The difference between “the old man” or “the’old man” manifests the impulse to regulate meter. What would this impulse say if it could say something? Maybe it would answer the speaker’s question “How is it that you live, and what is it that you do?” insamuch as the “life” or “vitality” of the old man is strongly connected to the regularity and order of his speech (“And there was, while he spake, a fire about his eyes”) (98, N 400).

What the Leech Gatherer “renews” is not so much “discourse” as the impulse to speak in “Choice word and measured phrase, above the reach/Of ordinary men” (102-03, N 400). The agency of meter assumes the form of the old man’s directionless movement “from pond to pond...from moor to moor” and then mutates into an indiscriminate flow:

But now his voice to me was like a stream
 Scarce heard; nor word from word could I divide;
 And the whole Body of the man did seem
 Like one whom I had met with in a dream;
 Or like a Man from some far region sent;
 To give me human strength, and strong admonishment.
 (114-119, N 400)

There are well-known echoes here of Spenser’s *Prothalamion* (“Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song...”) and the “pleasant noise of waters” from the opening stanza. What “moves” from “stream” to “seem” to “dream” is a rhyme

scheme that drives the speaker's "untoward thoughts." The inner couplet propels a thematic turn, which in lines 115 and 116 above ("And the whole Body of the man did seem/Like one whom I had met with in a dream;") is a sublime turning "with the might of waters." For the speaker, however, what propels this turn is uncertainly located; close as a dream, yet an admonishment from afar. Like the "pleasant noise of waters" ("no one waterfall above another" as Dorothy puts it) the old man's speech is articulate without being meaningful. It is as though the narrative voice of "Resolution and Independence" had achieved a standpoint "outside" of its own rhetorical flow, where flowing numbers are not assimilable to a flowing consciousness.¹

Lines 114 to 115 make the transition from "nor word from word could I divide" to "the whole Body of the man..." Both the stream of the old man's voice and his Body are whole and indivisible, and whatever moves them, moves them as a whole:

Motionless as a Cloud the Old Man stood;
That heareth not the loud winds when they call;
And moveth altogether, if it move at all.
(82-84, N 399)

In the part of the 1815 preface pertaining to "Resolution and Independence," Wordsworth explains how the imagination can "unify" and "coalesce." Yet the narrator of "Resolution and Independence" cannot attain access to Wordsworth's preface because it exists on a different narrative level. Nor should we assume that

the speaker is a person who “uses” metaphors and similes, although the poem might well be “mentioning” them through the speaker’s description of the Leech Gatherer. The speaker encounters the unifying and coalescing power of voice and figurality through the uncanny agency of the old man, and as a figure of this unifying agency, the old man coalesces through movement. The old man is not conscious of his means of movement—he is like a cloud that “heareth not the loud winds when they call.” Moreover, the old man is not unified at all when standing motionless: “Himself he propp’d, his body, limbs, and face,/Upon a long grey Staff of shaven wood... (78-79, N 399).

In these lines, the old man’s body is not “the whole body,” but an item in a list (body, limbs and face) all of which are propped on his staff. Body, limbs and face are not unified—unity has to be propped. What unifies unity—what supports it? The Old Man’s long grey staff seems to be a figure for this mystery.

Wordsworth tells us what supports figural unity in his preface to *Poems* of 1815, and in particular, the unity of life and death, animate and inanimate figured by the Leech Gatherer. He takes as his example the epic simile cited earlier in this chapter:

The stone is endowed with something of the power of life to approximate it to the sea-beast, and the sea-beast stripped of some of its vital qualities to assimilate it to the stone—which intermediate image is thus treated for the purpose of bringing the original

image (that of the stone) to a nearer resemblance to the figure and condition of the aged man, who is divested of so much of the indications of life and motion as to bring him to the point where the two objects unite and coalesce in just comparison. (N 514)

The operation of “endowment” and “abstraction” sets up or “props” figural unity by endowing the stone with vital qualities, and stripping “vital qualities” from the sea beast, thereby “assimilating” stone and sea beast. The stone is now an “intermediate image” with animate qualities, and by abstracting life from the old man, the two come together in a second-order simile. The imaginative operations of endowment and abstraction thereby prop the figural “unity” or “just comparison” of man and stone (“unify,” “coalesce,” “approximate” and “assimilate” are all figures of figural agency, set up by endowment and abstraction).

What are “endowment” and “abstraction”? Geoffrey Hartman invokes a dialectical reconciliation that brings life and death eternally closer in this description of the Leech Gatherer:

...if he is dying, it is into the life of nature, and if he seems so alive, it is because he gives the impression of having already died, in the sense that his great dignity and steadfastness appear no longer as purely mortal qualities...” (202)

In formal terms, the negation is relative: “dying” is inverse life (“the life of Nature”), and living is inverse death; i.e., life predicated on a steadfastness beyond life. In these terms, endowment and abstraction precipitates an *equilibrium* of life

and death. Equilibrium is not a spatial trope of “in-betweenness” and “blending,” nor is it a dialectical reconciliation. Inasmuch as equilibrium “reconciles” opposites, it does so by putting a hole in classical logic—a point that Kant made in a pre-critical essay called “Attempt to Introduce Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy,” in turn taken up by Coleridge in his *Treatise on Logic* (Barfield 265) when he noted that a physical object in equilibrium is both moving and not moving—a contradiction. Wordsworth describes the imagination stripping vitality from the sea beast and adding it to the stone, but the language of stripping and adding qualities masks a relation: *the vitality of the stone is inversely related to the vitality of the sea beast*. The resulting poetic image is a relative entity, in “equilibrium”—like the “relative zero” in “ $1 + -1 = 0$,” to use Kant’s example: a “relative zero” that logic can only read as *unrepresentable* contradiction.

The Leech Gatherer is such an antithetically relative entity—and likewise the Cumberland Beggar. Wordsworth uses endowment and abstraction to figure the Cumberland Beggar’s agency, which approaches the elemental, even as the elements become more vital—his freedom and vitality relative to a subtraction of freedom and vitality:

...let him breathe
 The freshness of the vallies, let his blood
 Struggle with the frosty air and winter snows,
 And let the charter’d wind that sweeps the heath
 Beat his grey locks against his wither’d face.
 Reverence the hope whose vital anxiousness

Gives the last human interest to his heart. (165-171, E 137)

Inasmuch as animate and inanimate are exchanging properties in the above, it happens through a series of privative symmetries: the elements are declared free, even as the beggar's freedom begins to seem more elemental (more tied to animal-mineral agency); in struggling with air and snow, the old man's blood is placed on the level of the elements, while the elements become more like a vitalizing force; the wind that sweeps the heath beats the old man's locks, making the heath more like hair, and the hair more like the heath. We can read these negations as "dialectical," but only by trying to imagine whatever it is the Leech Gatherer and the Cumberland Beggar might become at the limit, when the animate and inanimate realms really do swap properties. At that limit they are like the "equilibrium" or "relative zero" precipitated by mutually negating forces—like those objects all around us, "out there" in the real world, that logical negation can only "see" as contradiction.

In the Leech Gatherer and the Cumberland Beggar, animate and inanimate are exchanging properties to create a state that is impossible to imagine as an inner life. In particular, the Cumberland Beggar's eye becomes more mineralized and attached to the ground, even as "nature's eye" begins to acquire a gaze. Sight in these terms could be taken as sight-in principle, beyond any naturalized notion of sight. What matters is that the sun shines into the Cumberland Beggar's eyes

whether they see the light of the sun or not: "...let the light at least/Find a free entrance to their languid orbs./And let him, *where* and *when* he will, sit down (182-84, N 187). Light's freedom to move becomes (in line 184) the Cumberland Beggar's freedom to sit down where and when he will, although in this "freedom" the old man becomes mineralized and animalized; his movement is a repetitive principle of continuity for the neighborhood, through his daily rounds of begging.

The "eye of Nature" embodies a similar principle of continuity for the old man: "As in the eye of Nature he has liv'd,/So in the eye of Nature let him die (188-89, N 137). "Resolution and Independence" picks up this image of an eye in the sky: "Beside a pool bare to the eye of heaven/I saw a Man before me unawares" — which recalls the description of an epitaph in Wordsworth's "First Essay on Epitaphs": "open to the day; the sun looks down upon the stone,/and the rains of heaven beat against it (334). In all of these passages the emphasis is on bareness or openness to "the eye of heaven" whose gaze is corrosive via the Shakespearean echo "sometimes too hot the eye of heaven shines" and connected with images of erosion, such as rains beating against the headstone and wind beating the locks of the Cumberland beggar against his face. By "reading" an old solitary as one of its own, the solar eye would assimilate him into the life of Nature—albeit by eroding or breaking him down to inanimate matter. A similar

privation affects the gaze of the sun, as something of a dead gaze, relativized like the Beggar's own sight.

The solar amelioration of ruin recalls the sun's endowment of voice to the ruined statue of Memnon —a colossus on the Nile, and a stock image of German and English Romanticism. The life with which the solar eye endows the Leech Gatherer and the Cumberland Beggar is privative because it implicates them in the inanimate realm—and so too are the “endowment” and “abstraction” of imagination, which is very close to the touch of ruin, which adorns as it destroys.

5. Blake and Wordsworth

In this chapter I juxtaposed Blake's “Urizen” with the narrator of Wordsworth's “Resolution and Independence”: both encounter poetic agency from the outside, and thereby encounter the alterity of imagination. The poetry of Wordsworth and Blake folds on itself—or “encounters” its own power. For Steven Knapp, the Leech-Gatherer is “nothing more than a materialized deposit, a kind of personified sediment or precipitate, of the stanzas that serve as the deliberately awkward and alien medium of the speaker's meditation” (119). In encountering the Leech Gatherer, the speaker encounters the “alien medium” of his thought, which in fact exists one narrative level up: he cannot know that it was Wordsworth who imposed meter on his thought.

Put another way, the speaker cannot know the form of his own meditation because it exists one narrative level higher than the diegesis: when he encounters it, he experiences a drift of attention that marks a place where the poem stumbles on its power of representation. By encountering the Leech Gatherer, the narrator encounters something alien in the fit between his thought and Spenserian stanza. Along analogous lines, Urizen purifies himself of “the awkward and alien medium” of sympathetic metaphorical identification, only to witness the return of the repressed as the metamorphosis of his children: metaphor slips into metamorphosis. This slippage occurs at the level of the narration, where tropological transfers slide into descriptions of change; a phenomenon that Urizen “experiences” as reification. Thus, the blurring of literal and figural agency signals a point where the poem folds on itself to register its power.

Steven Knapp, however, necessarily cuts Blake from his brilliant study on self-reference, personification and the sublime because he does not find a sharp discrepancy between literal and figural agency in the mythic figures of Blake:

Much of the interest of the *issue* of personification... depends on an overt distinction between allegorical and literal agents. In the partly figurative and partly literal characters of Romantic myth-making, the contrast between these separate kinds of agency disappears. I have focused instead on examples in which the shock of encountering embodied metaphors is clearly felt. (6)

While it is easy to agree that personification sets up an “overt” distinction between figural and literal agents, it is not true that “the contrast between these separate kinds of agency *disappears*” [my italics] in myth-making. It is replaced with a contrast between tropological transformations and metamorphic change—and their strange re-entanglement. Considering the “dire change” that passes over Urizen’s children, Vincent de Luca says that “because Blake’s poems are nonmimetic, there is a blurred distinction between rhetorical figures and scenic dramatizations, where tropes (already by definition “turns”) palpably turn into metamorphic beings” (75). The “*palpable*” nature of the turn registers a discrepancy: a detectable “bump” in the movement from rhetorical figures to “scenic dramatization” through which imagination stages “the shock of encountering embodied metaphors.”

Thus, the somatic symptoms (dire physical changes suffered by Urizen and his children) are not just mythically described—they register the shock of reified metaphor, much as Virgil’s personified description of Mt. Atlas does when it threatens to reify the suffering of a man-mountain. Atlas is a bridge between Blake’s amphibians and Wordsworth’s borderers discussed at some length by Geoffrey Hartman, and taken up in the next chapter of this study. De Luca brings up a related tension between myth and rhetorical figures when he cites Paul de Man in connection with the turning of tropes into metamorphic beings: “when one speaks of the legs of a table or the face of the mountain, catachresis is already

turning into prosopopoeia” (75). Inasmuch as de Luca is taking Urizen’s children as catachresis, there is something peculiar about his analysis—they are metamorphic beings. Yet, “leg of the table” is a metaphor that takes a monstrously reifying turn, and in this sense, recalls the reifying turn of figures into metamorphosis (Virgil’s Atlas is the “face of the mountain”—a dead metaphor revived). It is in the slippage between categories of the rhetor and the literary critic that imagination produces “the shock of embodied metaphor,” thematized as the suffering of Atlas, the “dire constraint” of the Leech Gather that bends him double, or the glittering torment of Urizen’s children (symptoms of contracted vision).

Myth, from this angle, is not entirely distinct from what John Ashbery calls “over-particularized” personification, or its incongruities. For example, when Urizen’s children become something more than personifications, the shift is marked: they take on monstrous grandeur reminiscent of Milton’s Satan. When female emanations begin complaining, or developing a separate will, or a higher awareness, there is often trouble or a threat of trouble, and Blake marks this discretely. Following the work of John B. Pierce on *The Four Zoas*, Vincent de Luca has noted that “Tharmas is notably absent from the earliest extant layer of copperplate transcription found on pages 7-42, except for two fleeting allusions where he seems “little more than a name *or a personification of the sea* [my italics] (119). As a fully mythic being, however, Tharmas “inflicts trauma on the cosmos”

and “is perhaps the emblem of a trauma the author has himself imposed on his own developing text” (119). This trauma is both a textual discontinuity and one of many material marks of revision: it occurs at a place where the manuscript changes abruptly from “ornate (or copperplate transcription)” to Blake’s writing on the proofsheets of Young’s *Night Thoughts*—a poem that Blake illustrated (117). The distinction between personification and fully mythic being gets marked by a cut or trauma in the text—a thematic reification of chaos (Tharmas) and a physical mark of Blake’s revision in the manuscript of *The Four Zoas*. Marking the break is Urizen’s rejection of Ahania—analyzed in this chapter as a trigger of chaos.

By incarnating poetic agency, the state of amphibious beings resists understanding, and through this resistance, imagination signifies itself. As I read Blake and Wordsworth in the next chapter, identification with the amphibian stages a “death drive” whose aim is a border-state of basal existence. For Blake, identification with the amphibian is the *reductio* of the impulse to contemplate the index of imagination rather than identify with it directly. Blakean vision annihilates “self-conscious” imagination—and along with it, the “selfhood.” In contrast, certain poems of Wordsworth evidence “the self-reference” of the “Wordsworthian sublime” as Steven Knapp calls it—generalizing the structure from “Resolution and Independence” to Wordsworth’s doctrine of the spots of time. Taken into its fully linguistic turn, this kind of reflexivity poses a problem:

language apparently stumbles on its own power as something *outside* of language—or at least beyond representation. How can a power external to language appear inside of it? It is signaled by images charged with apparent meaning that nonetheless pose a formal resistance to understanding. The “amphibian” or embodied metaphor is a special case.

CHAPTER 3

REFLEXIVE IMAGINATION: THEORY AND EXAMPLES

1. What is a Reflexive Figure?

In this chapter, I read Ashbery and Wordsworth together, focusing on the salience of images and decontextualized objects that are the “survivors” of ruin, mutability or eroded memory. These index power, and are analogs of the “amphibians” examined in the last chapter. I conclude by analyzing Blake’s metaphors, which disrupt conventional decorum to index uncastrated desire—suggesting forms of identification grounded in something other than analogy. At the limit, Blakean figurality is a mode of being, or annihilation of “selfhood,” and there is a similar extreme in the poetry of A.R. Ammons: a performative self-reference, through which the “energy” of metaphor collapses into the energy of nature. Before turning to these readings, however, I shall describe “reflexive imagination” in terms friendlier to everyday notions of rhetoric; i.e., as the special case of a *reflexive figure*.

Reflexive figures perform operations on their own definitions and formal constraints. As I define it, this kind of figurality modifies its own meta-language by modifying dichotomies that rationalize the theory of tropes, or tropological imagination. Among the examples that I examine here

are “burying” of the tenor by an over-particularized vehicle (Blake and Ashbery), deferral of vehicle (Ashbery), semi-descriptive or overparticularized personification (Ashbery), highlighting of the difference between metaphor and non-analogical substitution (Paul de Man), a blurring of that very same distinction (Ashbery and Blake), interference between myth and allegory (Blake), and a collapse of the difference between emblem and idea (Blake).

Figurality is “self referential” when it disrupts oppositions in its meta-language. When figurality blurs the opposition between figural and literal agency *it operates on a distinction that is one level up—in the meta-language of figures*. This crossing of language levels is a cognitive discontinuity that the poet and critic take to signify “power,” variously thematized as imagination, spirit, or an extra-linguistic “real” of language. This study brackets thematizations of power, to focus on the reflexive conceits that point to it. Why do poets and critics feel that the cognitive discontinuity of a reflexive figure is an index of power? In this study, I take this “feeling” to be primarily aesthetic. What follows is an attempt to explain and describe instances of such a feeling, read in the poetry of Wordsworth, Blake and Ashbery, and the work of literary critics on the reflexivity of

tropological language. Thus, while the examples in this chapter are intended to illuminate reflexive tropological form, they are not catalogs of examples, but readings of poetry and criticism that explore how and why reflexive figurality gives us pleasure, and in particular, why it gives us pleasure to re-thematize the cognitive disruption of a reflexive figure as “power.”

Wordsworth reminds us that poetry should give pleasure, and literary theory sometimes arises from the close reading of a particular poet. For example, Hazard Adams—by drawing on Blake and the literary theory of Northrop Frye (Frye 124)—introduced an antithetical event into his dynamical theory of tropological language: the point at which “outward” pointing language turns “inward,” by containing the world in mathematical language, or as mythic form, or metaphorical identification. What Blake figured as the “opening” of a center into a circumference is a sublime trope insofar as it exceeds a distinction between “inward” and “outward” pointing language: there is a nodal point where the distinction breaks down—“inside” contains “outside”—and this is an irrational index of creative power: “The Circumference is Within, Without is formed the Selfish Center” (71). In his reading of Wordsworth’s “There was a boy...,” Paul de Man takes the substitution of living speaker for dead boy as an index of linguistic power. The sense that language defends against its own power is generated by a

reflexive figure—and the reader of the critic’s text takes pleasure in the critic’s construction, which has its own, austere power (10).

What emerges is an imagination that seems exterior to us, while simultaneously intimate—or “extimate,” to borrow Lacan’s portmanteau word (itself a reflexive figure).¹ Thus, in Wordsworth’s “Resolution and Independence,” an equivocation between figural and literal agency results from an impulse to allegorically personify the Leech Gatherer, in conflict with his “natural” status (Knapp, 106). I have argued that there is an analogous equivocation in Blake’s myth—a turn of tropes into metamorphosis. The resulting anomalies, considered in Chapter 1 and elaborated in this chapter, “index” figurality that disrupts understanding—and all the more asks that the reader interpret the disruption.

The rhetor’s categories take the form of oppositions, and all such dichotomies are open to a reflexive turn of tropes:

1. Figural vs. literal
2. Tenor vs. vehicle
3. Use vs. mention
4. Meta vs. object level
5. Metaphor vs. metamorphosis

¹ Glossing Lacan, Jacques Alain-Miller’s website notes that “the most interior...has in the analytic experience, a quality of exteriority...this Other who, more intimate than my intimacy stirs me.” The discourse of “this Other” would be that of the unconscious (Miller). Yet, “extimacy” is not just a theoretical term; it generates a naïve topological construction of what—as portmanteau word (“extimate”)—cannot be understood. It is this movement beyond figural understanding to construction that indexes figurality in its “unconscious” dimension.

6. Allegory vs. myth
7. Proper vs. improper
8. Inside vs. outside
9. Difference vs. sameness
10. Metaphor vs. mistake
11. Logical contradiction vs. metaphor-as-contradiction
12. Logical paradox vs. paradox-as-poetic-meaning
13. Analogically grounded metaphor vs. ungrounded substitution
14. Observer language (meta-language) vs. human observer (narrative standpoint)
15. Contrary vs. negation (Blake)
16. Active vs. passive contrary (Blake)
17. Center vs. circumference (Blake)

A reflexive figure can destabilize the definition of allegory by bleeding the latter into myth, or collapse the distance between emblem and idea.

Personification is also a malleable category: personifications seem like literal agents when overparticularized—and literal agents seem like personifications when they become abstract. The distinction between analogical and non-analogical substitution sometimes is qualified by substitution that seems partially analogical, or by something non-analogical in the attempt to define metaphor as substitution. An observer language—assumed by the rhetor in order to talk about figurality—can mutate into an observer (#14 above). An observer can narrate from the “inside” of figurality, from the “outside,” or from somewhere in between—as I showed in Chapter 1, taking Urizen and the narrator of “Resolution and

Independence” as such points of view. It is also a conceit that I examine in my chapters on A.R. Ammons and John Ashbery.

The throughline in these examples is that the meta-language of tropological imagination—the *mention* of figurality—always serves a *use*. Quintillian, for example, defined metaphor as “substitution,” but his definition redounds upon itself:

1. Metaphor is substitution.
2. “Metaphor is substitution” is a substitution of “substitution” for “metaphor.”

Cleanth Brooks invoked a version of this use-mention entanglement in “The Language of Paradox.” Citing “palm to palm is holy palmer’s kiss” from *Romeo and Juliet*, Brooks noted that in Shakespeare, as in the poetry of Donne, there is a connection between “the sense in which the lovers become one” and “the sense in which the soul is united with God”:

Frequently, as we have seen, one type of union becomes a metaphor for the other. It may not be too far-fetched to see both as *instances of, and metaphors for*, the union which the creative imagination itself effects. For that fusion is not logical; it apparently violates science and common sense; it welds together the discordant and the contradictory. [my italics] (18)

Inasmuch as metaphors of union are also “*instances*” of union, such metaphors mention their own agency, collapsing the distinction below:

1. “Welding of opposites” (*metaphor* of metaphorical union)
META-LANGUAGE
2. “Welding of opposites” (*instance* of metaphorical union)

OBJECT LANGUAGE

The rhetor “mentions” figurality in definitions, and “uses” figures in examples—but the entanglement of those levels is itself a figure, and one that necessarily eludes the rhetor’s classifications. More generally, the metalanguage of tropes sets up tropes that operate on metalanguage. Such figures I call “reflexive,” turning now to examples. I.A. Richard’s distinction between tenor and vehicle (95-100)—a “mention” of figurality—serves a poetic “use” when figurality operates on it, and we find a version of this entanglement in Blake’s poem, “The Human Abstract,” when the speaker describes the Tree of Mystery’s growth:

Soon spreads the dismal shade
Of Mystery over his head;
And the Catterpillar and the Fly
Feed on the Mystery. (E 28)

Robert Essick has noted that ““The Caterpillar and the Fly,” which we can imagine feeding on a tree, instead feed on its tenor, “Mystery”” (225). The word “feed” is a reflexive metaphor because it collapses tenor and vehicle, substantializing “Mystery.” Metaphorical imagination points to an irrational dimension of its power by blurring tenor and vehicle—imagination deforms its own form, inasmuch as its mode of creation becomes perversely substantializing or materializing.

W.K. Wimsatt reads a different entanglement of tenor and vehicle in the following lines from Wordsworth's ode, "Intimations of Immortality":

"And see the children sport upon the shore,/And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore" (169-70, 438). Wimsatt paraphrases: "our souls in a calm mood look back to the infinity from which they came, as persons inland on clear days can look back to the sea by which they have voyaged to the land." However, the figure entangles its tenor (which "concerns souls and age and time") with its vehicle (which "concerns travelers and space"): the children "are...attracted over, from tenor to vehicle" (114). The figure imposes time onto space (children onto beach) through "a warping or modification of vehicle by tenor" or "a sleight of words, an imposition of image on image, by the *modifying* power of imagination" (114). This is the "modifying power" that Wordsworth describes in his Preface of 1815 (115); yet, the terms "imposition" and "sleight of words" also suggest positional power, which, in Paul de Man's sense, is not figural.

For Wimsatt, however, tenor and vehicle short-circuit to index an irrational power of imagination. He maintains that nature, as the source of a surmise or reminiscence, is also "the source of the metaphors by which the reminiscence is described" (113). Thus allegorical personifications of nature "descend into the landscape and fuse with it"; for example, when Blake's

“Summer” takes on characteristics of the sun, “only to sleep in the shade of the oaks and be invited to rush into the river for a swim” (133). Elsewhere, “the iconic or directly imitative powers of language” seem to conjure up the natural phenomena that figure them, as in Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind,” where iconic power gives “an impression beyond statement of the very wildness, the breath and power which is the vehicle of the poem’s radical metaphor” (115).

William Keach examines short-circuits or near-short circuits in his study of reflexive imagery in Shelley. He notes that “coreless heart” from *Queen Mab* (80) is a figure that threatens to collapse tenor and vehicle through the near-synonymous meaning of “core” and “heart.” Keach connects this to Wimsatt’s model of nature imagery in which “tenor and vehicle are wrought in a parallel process out of the same material” (80). Like Wimsatt, Keach invokes a mental power that both distinguishes tenor and vehicle—and narrows the distance between them—threatening to collapse the distance entirely. Thus, reflexive imagery presents a capacity of Romantic imagination to beget difference from sameness, and collapse it again. An example is “circling steps which rested on/Their own deep fire” from *The Revolt of Islam*. Keach says that “what the steps rest on is an aspect of themselves” (80). Therefore, “the basis of the reflexive image *per*

se is grammatical and syntactical; the signifying function of a phrase or clause turns back on itself, and its doing so marks an ‘operation of the human mind’ that couples analysis or division (as an aspect is separated from the idea to which it belongs) with synthesis or reunion (as the separated or divided aspect is re-identified with that same idea)” (80).

Such a figure is uncertainly invoked, either as a “reconciliation of opposites,” or as a generator of difference, due to its purely formal character as a suspension of difference and sameness. William Empson had noted, somewhat disparagingly, the *pro-forma* nature of what he called “short-circuits” and “interwoven similes” in Shelley—exemplified by the repeated grammatical formulation “their own,” “its own,” “his/her own.” Empson noted that Shelley could weave a spell with reflexive imagery—but also relied on it too much, deploying it as an empty formal device (161).

There is something spectral about the “reconciliation” of the reflexive image, and something hollow about the difference it generates. Keach stresses “the figure’s peculiar capacity to suggest both the creative power and limitation of imagination” (81)—for example, imagination’s auto-eroticism, in taking itself as its own object. In Shelley’s *Alastor*, the poet projects an ideal female companion, and “saw by the warm light of their own life/Her glowing limbs.” The self-illumination of the female’s limbs is

the self-sufficiency of the visionary's own imagination, but also, a solipsism figured by the grammatical reflexivity of an "involved adverbial phrase" ("saw by the warm light of their own life") (Keach, 82).

In Blake's myth, solipsism takes a dark turn. Sexual division, for Blake, begets difference through a "division of the soul—it consolidates a "selfhood" in relation to a separate feminine counterpart (most characteristically figured as an externalized nature). Vision seizes a misrecognized portion of itself when it seizes its sexual other, as in the scene below (analyzed in Chapter 1, and mentioned in the opening of the present chapter):

Eternity shudder'd when they saw,
Man begetting his likeness,
On his own divided image (78)

By repressing sympathetic identity in favor of self-begetting difference, visionary power falls into a solipsistic eroticism. A gap opens up between male and female, perversely "reconciled" by their sexual congress. The grammatical form "his own" recalls "the emphatic possessive" analyzed by Keach, and Blake also uses the formulation to describe Urizen's children in *The Four Zoas*: "Scard at the sound of *their own* sigh that seems to shake the immense [my italics]" (340).

In Blake's myth, we see a conscious attempt to frame self-begotten difference as a perversion of visionary form. The self is other to itself when it falls into self-division through aberrant forms of self-relation, such as "pity"—or the self-division that manifests Urizen's "self-begotten armies," and his isolation as "A self-contemplating shadow." Sympathetic identity—which simultaneously asserts the same and the different—shifts to the self-begotten difference that abstracts Urizen from a presumably integral whole in *The Book of Urizen*, making him "self-closd, all repelling" (1.3, E 69). For Blake, the crux of reflexive images is, therefore, their capacity to beget difference—and simultaneously collapse it. In this, they parody a dynamical and creative tension between difference and sameness. Reflexive images put us oddly "outside" of imagination—as though it were logical paradox—and "inside" of it, as a form of understanding "analysis or division" that is "coupled with synthesis or reunion" (Keach, 80). In short, the reflexive image disrupts a distinction between "reconciling" and "non-reconciling" power, staging a self-relation that is not quite comprehensible.

2. Wordsworth and the Mirror-Lake

Analogically sympathetic imagination would seem ideally figured by the Romantic mirror-lake: an image of mind reflecting nature, figuring a harmony ("fit" and "fittedness") between them that Blake famously

critiqued. But, the image also undermines the “logic” of sympathy by transforming imagination’s reconciliation of the same and different into a suspension that is austere and uncanny. The lake’s surface introduces a cut between reflected and real sky—yet also receives that “uncertain heaven” into its bosom, to paraphrase famous lines from Wordsworth’s poem on the Boy of Winander. Consider, for example, the lines below, written by Wordsworth in 1833:

The leaves that rustled on this oak-crowned hill,
And sky that danced among those leaves, are still;
Rest smooths the way for sleep; in field and bower
Soft shades and dews have shed their blended power
On drooping eyelid and the closing flower;
Sound is there none at which the faintest heart
Might leap, the weakest nerve of superstition start;
Save when the Owlet’s unexpected scream
Pierces the ethereal vault; and ‘mid the gleam
Of unsubstantial imagery—the dream,
From the hushed vale’s realities transferred
To the still lake, the imaginative Bird
Seems, ‘mid inverted mountains, not unheard. (241)

Dubbed “the imaginative bird,” the Owlet strikes a “nerve of superstition” that interrupts the speaker’s drowsy identification with the scene. The description of the owl as “imaginative” suggests, for a moment, that owl has an imagination—rather than rather than provoking the listener’s imagination—or that the Owl has become an imaginative type through his cry. The ambiguities put imagination in play, as though it were dislocated,

and entangled with the Owl. Inasmuch as the owl's scream is "Transferred/to the still lake," it "Seems, 'mid inverted mountains, not unheard"; i.e., heard amid the reflected mountains in the lake, as though they were part of an alternate world—or a world of imagination that opens onto the inhuman realm, and perhaps partakes of it.

Such an imagination is what the poem figures as the reflected abyss of the lake—where the "dream" of the vale is "transferred." The image recurs in these opening lines from another late poem called "Twilight by the Side of Grasmere Lake":

A twofold slumber the huge hills partake
High in the air and deep in the still lake (248)

But, as Wordsworth tries to ameliorate the startling effect of the owl, he retreats from a dream-like absorption of the owl's cry, and appeals to a crude form of sympathetic imagination. He apostrophizes the "Grave Creature" as the classical "soul/Of sapience," and the owl of ruin ("Rising from what may once have been a Lady's bower") (242). Again, however, he is interrupted by the bird's screech:

Hark to that second larum! far and wide
The elements have heard, and rock and cave replied. (242)

This time the owl has definitely been "heard"—the litotic undercutting ("seems.../not unheard") is swept aside. Now, nature has heard the bird

through its internal echo. The speaker can only stand outside of this echo (a property of the surrounding hills) even as he stood, alienated from an imagination figured as the inverted abyss of the mirror-lake.

The setting of this poem recalls that of Wordsworth's famous poem on the Winander Boy, cited below in the version that appeared in the 1800 edition of *Lyrical Ballads*:

There was a Boy, ye knew him well, ye Cliffs
And Islands of Winander! many a time,
At evening, when the stars had just begun
To move along the edges of the hills,
Rising or setting, would he stand alone,
Beneath the trees, or by the glimmering lake,
And there, with fingers interwoven, both hands
Press'd closely palm to palm and to his mouth
Uplifted, he, as through an instrument,
Blew mimic hootings to the silent owls
That they might answer him. And they would shout
Across the wat'ry vale and shout again,
Responsive to his call, with quivering peals,
And long halloos, and screams, and echoes loud
Redoubled and redoubled, a wild scene
Of mirth and jocund din... (178)

The boy is unselfconsciously and passionately identified with nature—

Hartman invokes the “glad animal movements” described in “Tintern Abbey” (19) and de Man describes an “analogical correspondence between man and nature”: “the solid ground of a world in which nature and consciousness are ‘*interwoven*’[my italics]”—like the boy’s fingers (684 N).

In these opening lines, the boy's relation to nature is nonetheless framed in a larger context that implies the latter's alterity. "The stars had just begun/To move along the edges of the hills,/Rising and setting," but the "movement" of those stars is somewhat vertiginous and illusory: the place where the boy would "stand alone" is "rolled round in earth's diurnal course" (115 N). "Blew mimic hootings" puts the boy's articulate mimicry in counterpoint to the owls' cries and whatever motivates it; "silent owls," moreover, foreshadows the silence that will mark a traumatic break between the boy and nature. Finally, "fingers interwoven"—read as de Man's interwovenness of nature and consciousness—is in tension with "would he stand *alone* [my italics]."

Metaphor, as a simultaneous assertion of the same and the different (interwoven and alone), fails as a form of sympathy, splitting the boy into conscious and unconscious boy:

And when it chanced
That pauses of deep silence mock'd his skill,
Then, sometimes, in that silence, while he hung
Listening, a gentle shock of mild surprise
Has carried far into his heart the voice
Of mountain torrents; or the visible scene
Would enter unawares into his mind
With all its solemn imagery, its rocks,
Its woods, and that uncertain Heaven, receiv'd
Into the bosom of the steady Lake. (R 178)

“Pauses of deep silence” anticipate the boy’s death. In Hartman’s reading, nature “leads the child into consciousness of nature”—although “he dies before self-consciousness can fully emerge” (20). The boy is conscious of the failure of sympathetic imagination, but unconsciously, an irrational mode of identification takes over—one not based on analogy. The picturesque, reflecting lake described in *An Evening Walk*—“Whose mirror makes the landscape’s charms its own”—should be distinguished from the inverted depths in which the owl’s screech is “not unheard.” Inasmuch as “the visible scene would enter, unawares,” imagination imagines the form of its “sympathy” as something other than analogically metaphorical; rather, it is a trance-like state of absorption.

At the level of diction, C.C. Clarke noted in many of Wordsworth’s poems that his “language effectively cancels sharp disjunctions between...mind and the things it perceives”: “The uncompromising apposition ‘...its solemn imagery, its rocks,/Its woods ‘ implies a simple equivalence of imagery and outward objects and suggests that if it is not quite the rocks and woods themselves that enter the mind neither is it a mere picture of representation of them” (7). From this angle, the equivocation between “imagery and things imaged” situates—at the level of language—

the boy's "absorption" into nature, and recalls Hartman's claim that diction is a defense against discontinuity.

The sense that nature is defending against its own tutelary shock—softened via the "beautiful dimmenuendo" (Hartman 19), "a gentle shock of mild surprise"—might be qualified by considering that the shock might just as well be that of imagination: *consciousness of a break from nature is also consciousness of imagination*. Elsewhere in *Wordsworth's Poetry*, Hartman remarks that "The strongly neutral or 'it' aspect of much Wordsworthian landscape reveals an imagination in man or in nature which is strangely 'unnatural,' dehumanized" (350). "An imagination in man or in nature" suggests a non-local imagination—or an intersection of imagination and nature through something inhuman and common to both.

The opposition "imagination vs. nature" entangles to index a discontinuity uncertainly redeemed as a tutelary influence of nature. The boy dies:

Fair are the woods, and beauteous is the spot,
The vale where he was born: the Church-yard hangs
Upon a slope above the village school,
And there along that bank when I have pass'd
At evening, I believe, that near his grave
A full half-hour together I have stood,
Mute—for he died when he was ten years old. (178)

Hartman says of the boy's arrested entry into self-consciousness, "Perhaps it is better thus to die into nature than to survive one's former self. The poet who stands at the child's grave knows that consciousness is always *of* death, a confrontation of the self with a buried self" (22).

The speaker stands outside of his identification with the boy, even as the Winander boy stands outside of his identification with nature.

Imagination, in failing to imagine itself, projects such standpoints:

1. "At evening.../would he *stand* alone." [my italics]
2. A full half-hour together I have *stood*..." [my italics]

The artifice of the speaker's standpoint is made clear by his capacity to report what the child experienced "unawares." How is this possible—even if we take the child as a childhood self? Where does the speaker stand in relation to this child?

In de Man's reading, the speaker substitutes himself for a dead boy who we might read as the speaker's boyhood self; however, there is no analogical basis for comparing a living and dead self. The death that befell the boy is—through an implied substitution of speaker for boy—the death that the speaker anticipates. "A pseudo-metaphorical and thematically inconceivable substitution of persons leads to a temporal reversal"—a form of "metalepsis." Thus, "the poem does not reflect on death but on the

retorical power of language that can make it seem as if we could anticipate the unimaginable” (9).

In this reading, tropological language “reflects on” (writes) its power through a pseudo-metaphorical (non-analogical) substitution. De Man distinguishes (and entangles) semantic and non-semantic aspects of language in his reading of “There was a boy...,” noting that: “we look for the delicate area where the thematic, semantic field and the rhetorical structures begin to interfere with each other, begin to engage each other” (5). The substitution of speaker for Winander boy marks this interference: rhetorical substitution usurps theme, and the poem takes that very usurpation or discontinuity as a thematized power, or more accurately in this poem, as an index of death’s radical discontinuity.

Reflexive disruptions are elsewhere situated in Wordsworth’s poetry when surprise collapses into shock—unsoftened by diminuendo, and perhaps beyond the defense of diction:

Surprised by joy—impatient as the wind
I turned to share the transport—Oh! With whom
But thee, long buried in the silent tomb... (CPWW 310)

The speaker’s aborted turn to his dead daughter (“I turned to share...”) becomes a defensive turn of apostrophe: the “Oh!” of pain becomes the “O!” of apostrophe in the lyric present. Through this collapse, the speaker’s

imagination defends against a faithless imagination—allied with present joy—that had momentarily blotted out the memory of his daughter. Neither the speaker nor the poem really recovers from this moment.

Although reflexive turns are set up by hard and fast distinctions between shock and surprise, imagination and nature, analogical and non-analogical substitution—the entanglement or blurring of these distinctions also signifies power. Blake complicates the distinction between analogical and non-analogical substitution when describing “the great city of Golgonooza” in *Jerusalem*:

And the eyes are the South, and the Nostrils are the East.
And the Tongue is the West, and the Ear is the North.
(12.59-60, E 154)

There is no analogy between organs of sense and points of the compass—no naïve image of a face that would reconcile the image. The above is catachresis, and moreover, as Vincent de Luca notes, “we cannot speak easily of vehicle and tenor here, for the facial images and the geographical regions rob each other of their vehicular power” (100).

However, the reader of Blake’s myth also knows that these compass points map to Urizen, Luvah, Tharmas and Urthona. In the fallen world, the gate of the ear is the portal of imagination (Urthona), whose compass point is north. The ears are “the every-varying spiral ascents to the heavens of

heavens” in *Europe*, alternately described in *Thel* as “a whirlpool fierce to draw creations in” (17). Cleared of dross and vapors, the ear opens to take dictation from spirits, or so Blake claimed. The identification of “ear” and “North” remains non-analogical, but when informed by Blake’s myth, it figures the act of hearing with an active ear. Assimilated further into myth—or visionary reality—the line reads as “literal” description: the particulars of the vision are—what they are. By deliberately disrupting distinctions that regulate figurality, vision draws attention to the way that it is slipping the rhetor’s chains: it “rouzes the faculties to act” (E 676).

Blake’s description of his painting *A Vision of the Last Judgment* concludes with a statement on the individual nature of imagination:

What it will be Questiond When the Sun rises do you
not see a round Disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea O
no no I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly
host crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty
I question not my Corporeal or Vegetative Eye any more
than I would Question a window concerning a Sight I look
thro it & not with it. (E 555)

The guinea-sun grounds a consensus about the nature of reality that Northrop Frye calls “a communal perception of the sun” (29). Explicit to the idiot, this happy agreement represses an idiosyncratic identification of the rising sun with a celestial choir. Song-burst and sun-burst are identified via synesthesia. The identity of sun and hallelujah chorus also figures a non-

analogical leap of faith and creative perception—as in Blake’s image for the Book of Job, “when the morning Stars sang together, & all the Sons of God shouted for joy” (38.7).

On one extreme, the reduction of Phoebus to a round guinea is what Alexander Pope called “diminishing metaphor” in the *Peri Bathous* (387). The other pole threatens private enthusiasm, or what Vincent de Luca calls “catachrestic embarrassment”—the shock of “pseudo-metaphor.” At the limit, this kind of identification threatens non-transmittable fantasy—imagination parts ways from “sense” and “logic,” as Coleridge seems to have detected when he criticized Wordsworth for apostrophizing the child in Ode, “Intimations of Immortality”:

Thou best Philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
That deaf and silent, read’st the eternal deep,
Haunted for ever by the Eternal Mind,--
Mighty Prophet! Seer blest! (110, N 437)

The child, in this elevated sense, is no longer the historical Wordsworth or any other flesh and blood child; he emblemizes a collapse of power and meaning, as an “Eye” that “read’st.” Steven Knapp reads the child’s consciousness as imported from an allegorical personification and incongruously naturalized: “he” is a reflexive figure, indexing power (98-106).

Coleridge was especially critical of the child's sense of the grave as:

...a lonely bed without the sense or sight
Of day or the warm light,
A place of thought where we in waiting lie; (121-23, N 437)

In analyzing Wordsworth's lines, Coleridge notes that the grave as a "lonely bed" could only make sense if the child takes death for sleep. This is a banality, but the alternative does not make sense; i.e., that the child "has no other notion of death than that of lying in a dark, cold place? (571) And still I hope, not as in a place of thought! not the frightful notion of lying awake in his grave!" Coleridge concludes, "Thus, you must at once understand the words contrary to their common import, in order to arrive at any sense; and according to their common import, if you are to receive from them any feeling of sublimity or admiration" (571).

Coleridge takes this to be typical of "splendid paradoxes in general" (571), but this kind of "paradox" is not the "language of poetry" per Cleanth Brooks; i.e., it is not a reconciliation of opposites. In reading Wordsworth's lines, Coleridge found himself caught between...

1. A literal meaning that is sublime—but meaningless.
2. A figure that is banal, but meaningful.

Although Coleridge marks as "sublime" the impetus to hold in mind, "at once," the literal meaning of living death and the banal metaphor of sleep-as-death, the tension between absurdity and banality is not reconcilable.

Coleridge stands “outside” of Wordsworth’s identification with the child because he does not understand it, but he is “inside” in the sense of acknowledging an impulse to read against sense.

The “inside” of the child’s consciousness is the inside of unfallen imagination—however, this “inside” is being viewed from an outside that de-stabilizes reading. Coleridge asks how Wordsworth’s child could be a philosopher—how he “reads the eternal deep,” is a “Mighty Prophet,” and so forth: “By reflection? by knowledge? by conscious intuition? or by any form or modification of consciousness?” Coleridge asks: “if these mysterious gifts, faculties, and operations, are not accompanied with consciousness; who else is conscious of them? or how can it be called the child, if it be no part of the child’s conscious being?” (571)

Wordsworth is not imagining the grave, but trying to imagine the child’s imagination of it as “a place of thought where we in waiting lie.” This imagination of imagination situates an inscrutable kernel of fantasy motivating Wordsworth’s apostrophe to the child, detected by Coleridge. It is the kind of opaque investment that attracts John Ashbery to the poetry of Thomas Lovell Beddoes, and other fragments, culled from obscure corners of English poetry.

3. John Ashbery

Ashbery's deformations of metaphor, syntactical aberrations, and figural fragments blur a distinction between metaphor and mistake. The reader must suppress the impulse to straighten out syntax, trace back the missing tenor of a metaphor, or reconstruct sentences whose parts connect at odd angles.

Ashbery's figures resemble Wordsworth's spots of time in their decontextualization: they read like objects whose meaning is often obscure or indiscernible, although their salience is undeniable; they arrest (and formally project) a reader who stands outside of figural "imagination." Consider this line from a later poem, "Chinese Whispers": "Mute, the pancake describes you" (31). Objects that describe us, or tell us what we are, constitute a reader—or project the standpoint of a reader. The pancake, although a bit of a joke, might be compared with the more famous trees from Ashbery's early poem, "Some Trees":

These are amazing: each
Joining a neighbor, as though speech
Were a still performance. (51)

These trees also seem to project a spectator, constituting her: "...you and I are suddenly what the trees try/To tell us we are" (51). The trees seem solid and thing-like, but the pancake clock begins to mutate as the poem continues:

Mute, the pancake describes you.
 It had tiny Roman numerals embedded in its rim.
 It was a pancake clock. They had ‘em in those days. (31)

The lines drift from present to past tense, and as the poem continues, we get a sense of senile drift and old man’s memory—or the titular game of Chinese Whispers, in which a whispered message is incomprehensibly altered through transmission.

Like chance impressions in a walk through nature, the mutability of language produces “salient” objects, or things that “jump” out (“salient” is from the Latin, *salire*—to jump). Was Ashbery struck by the thingliness of the trees when he wrote about them? Is salience the property of an object or a piece of linguistic detritus? Salience is not a property of objects.

“Thingess” and “salience” are the representatives of figural imagination rather than a property of objects. “It was in truth/An ordinary sight” (1805 11.307-308, 480 W), as Wordsworth notes of the landscape beneath the Penrith beacon, and only now, in a moment of tranquility, does he realize that imagination had charged it with “visionary dreariness” in childhood. Steven Knapp connects this disparity between a past and present point of view to the discrepancy between an allegorical and literal reading of the Leech Gatherer’s agency—a discrepancy which is the true source of the old man’s uncanniness. Inasmuch as Ashbery’s figures draw attention to similar

discrepancies, he updates the self-referential sublime of overvaluation and error (Knapp, 109)).

The mutability of Ashbery's poems implicates figural language in a mutability of language—and especially the kind of reflexive mutations that are the focus of this study. Consider the “self-aware” figurality in this passage from “The Suspended Life”—a poem from Ashbery's somewhat infamous volume, *The Tennis Court Oath*: “The igloo sun, while I was away,/Chastened the wolverine towels” bleeds into free-association: “Isn't Idaho the wolverine state...” The passage returns to the towels, by way of “Ashtabula,/the towel city...” (36) Alternatively, consider the way that the following description dead-ends: “The colony of ants was marching toward me, stretching/far into the distance, where they were small as ants (YNH 126). “Ants...small as ants,” is a silly tautology, but the ants turn out to be surreally large: and so, it might be a comparison after all (of regular-sized and surreally large ants):

Ants are walking down the Champs-Elysees...
The larger ones have almost reached the allegorical statues
of French cities (is it?) on the Place de la Concorde (YNH 126)

In these lines, the poetry draws attention to narrative; as it flows, it forces us to re-evaluate lines that we took to be figural, or it otherwise distorts figurality. For example, description produces a reflexive figure when

it overruns the vehicle of a comparison, by giving too much information about it. Consider, for example, the over-particularized “lady” in the simile below, from the poem “Like a Sentence”:

...I was going to say I had squandered spring
 when summer came along and took it from me
 like a terrier a lady has asked one to hold for a moment
 while she adjusts her stocking in the mirror of a weighing machine.
 (ASWS 42)

The lines below are similar—but capture more of the mystery of embodied metaphor:

As inevitable as a barking dog, second-hand music
 drifts down five flights of stairs and out into the street,
 adjusting seams, checking makeup in pocket mirror (YNH 15)

“Second-hand music” is background noise wafting into foreground, and the swapping of foreground for background recurs elsewhere in Ashbery’s poetry, marked by the slamming of a screen door, or snatches of overheard conversation. In the above lines, the personification of drifting music—through its heightened particulars—is also a personification of figural form, drifting from decorum, and snapping into foreground.

In the case of the poem “Heartache,” rhetorical excess is a comic effect—but also signals trauma:

Sometimes a dangerous slice-of-life
 like stepping off a board-game
 into a frantic lagoon

drags the truth from the bathroom, where it has been hiding.
 “Do whatever you like to improve the situation,
 and—good luck,” it added, like a barber adding an extra plop of
 lather to a stupefied customer’s face. (YNH 42)

The passage releases a great deal of energy through a collision of mixed metaphor, jagged syntax and pushed personification, and thematize that very excess, as in the previous examples. The shock of “stepping off a board-game/into a frantic lagoon” is the shock of hidden depths opening up beneath routine existence; “frantic lagoon” suggests cartoonish thrashing and near-drowning. Allegory collapses under the weight of strange particulars, when the “slice of life” mutates into an accuser, compared to a barber.

As the poem continues, heartache becomes abstract—even as personification becomes more particular:

Snow lashed the windowpanes as though punishing them
 for having the property of being seen through...

...Night sprang out of the dense cold
 like an infuriated ocelot with her cub that someone had been trying
 to steal, or so it pretended. (YNH 42)

In lieu of a backstory about heartache, the poem relates a vague fable about children, transported out of a town, and converges on the following penultimate image:

There was no longer any room on the sidewalk
 for anything but “v’s” drawn in pink chalk, the way a child

draws a seagull. (YNH 43)

“More seagull snapshots,” Ashbery writes in his Vermont notebook. “You know they reduce to brownish blobs like old Bible camp photos” (65). These blobs on the emulsion of memory are like the pink “v’s” (above) that the child scrawls on the sidewalk to represent seagulls— they are markers of childhood memory and imagination. Charged with obscure feelings and queer tonalities, this kind of image seems to index repressed or forgotten context. But, it seems flat here—a screen memory with nothing to screen.

Ashbery’s personifications also have this flatness: as though “aware” of their own effects. They do not look like classic textbook examples—such as Carl Sandburg’s description of fog:

The fog comes
on little cat feet

It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on (71)

Compare this to the following excerpt from Ashbery’s “It Was Raining in the Capital” in his volume, *The Double Dream of Spring*:

For spring had entered the capital
Walking on gigantic feet.
The smell of witch hazel indoors
Changed to narcissus in the street. (235)

By “walking on gigantic feet” spring seems to make a brash entrance—and the image also stages this entrance through its own effect.

“It was Raining in the Capital” ends with a much quieter version of this swerve from description:

The sun came out in the capital
Just before it set.
The lovely death’s head shone in the sky
As though these two had never met. (DDS 21)

The sun, as “lovely death’s head,” emerges briefly to dispel the rain and meet the sky, as if meeting a stranger—a change in what Ashbery elsewhere calls “climate” or “weather.” As descriptive personification, it carries hints of a Thomas Lovell Beddoes-like usurpation of nature by artifice, but the figure is balanced between an analogical transfer of properties (the fog is quiet like a cat) and a leap (the sun is like a death’s head). The personification figures the sun as dead nature, but also brings the sun to life, and thereby mirrors the paradox of nature that precedes it: “the life around you is dead.”

Ashbery elsewhere figures changes of season through pushed personifications: “With half-parted lips/The way the breath of spring creeps up on you and floors you” (DDS, 254). Here is another example: “It was the solstice, and it was jumping on you like a friendly dog” (ASWS 76). In each

case, the personification highlights an excess in personification itself—an index of power that is tied to fluctuations of language.

Ashbery's void emblemizes itself through figural fragments that surface in the poem, or in the old man's memory of English poetic tradition, like found-objects dug up in the back yard. Thomas Lovell Beddoes, for example, presents a curio cabinet of embalmed surprises, and regarding his poetry, Ashbery remarks that "one can end up feeling that he just likes talking about death, that the sound of the word is comforting" (40). The death-obsession of Beddoes precipitates a "poisoned artifice" that detaches itself from context, turning inward on itself. Examples include the description of a crocodile—"The brown habergeon of his limbs enameled/With sanguine almondines and rainy pearl"—or, "These are as many/As bird-roads in the air." Ashbery asks: "Why not just stay here, trying to plumb the seemingly bottomless meaning of these fragments that are scarcely even chips?" (41)

Ashbery's poem "Flow Blue" from *Shadow Train*, begins by invoking fragments—and possibly talking about itself:

It may sound like a lot of odds and cloud-filled
Ends—at best, a thinking man's charmed fragment, perhaps

A house (42)

It ends by responding to the aesthetic pleasure that Ashbery in lingering with fragments—the impulse to ask, “Why not stay here...?”

This is not a place where I could stay. The endless ladder being carried
Past our affairs, like strings in a hop-field, decants
A piano-tuning we feed on it as it dances us to the edge. (42)

The speaker likens the “endless ladder”—already the vehicle of a metaphor—to the hop-field’s trellis strings. Both ladder and strings run off to infinity, perhaps giving us an image of windblown strings, dancing and vibrating, Aeolian lyre like, and taking our line of sight to the horizon. The vehicle of this metaphor is deferred from ladder, to trellis strings, to piano strings, and never really resolved: “we feed on it as it dances us to the edge” (of meaning), and this deferral introduces time into the poem.

4. Ashbery and Wordsworth

By invoking “piano tuning,” poetry aligns itself with the tonal and formal plasticity of experimental music, drawing attention to a distinction between timeless (spatialized) form and temporal unfolding. Ashbery elsewhere stages paradoxes of “flow” in such poems as “Flow Blue,” “Blue Sonata,” and “Syringa,” which implicate lyric in loss: the “flowing numbers” of a poem produce a string of self-erasing moments penetrated by a vertical axis in which a pattern is anticipated. In situating Ashbery in “the Western lyric tradition” Helen Vendler cites his notion that “The passage of

time is becoming more and more *the* subject of my poetry as I get older...”

(185)

Ashbery would attune the ears of his readers to a background “drone” of existence and mutability—“the endless ladder being carried past our affairs.” Wordsworth’s very different figure of dissolution is that of a “melancholy chime” heard by uncorrupted ears:

From low to high doth dissolution climb,
And sink from high to low, along a scale
Of awful notes, whose concord shall not fail;
A musical but melancholy chime,
Which they can hear who meddle not with crime,
Nor avarice, nor over-anxious care.
Truth fails not; but her outward forms that bear
The longest date do melt like frosty rime,
That in the morning whiten’d hill and plain
And is not more; drop like the tower sublime
Of yesterday, which royally did wear
His crown of weeds, but could not even sustain
Some casual shout that broke the silent air,
Or the unimaginable touch of Time. (3.34 179)

In Wordsworth’s sonnet, the loss and discontinuity implicit in the flow of music is a privileged metaphor for mutability, which touches the high and the low (nobody and nothing escapes it). The world wears down as it moves through time. In Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens*, the opening dialog between the Poet and the Painter captures something of this idea: “Poet: How goes the world? Painter: It wears sir, as it goes” (1.1.3-4, 70). However, the poem also sets up a discrepancy between time and a vertical axis penetrating the

flux of time at every moment—like the shafts of light that penetrate a hole in the roof of a ruined building. This immutable axis is named “truth.”

The poem manages to index what it cannot imagine. Dissolution’s continuous rising and falling is a pattern that the listener might anticipate: it runs “along” a scale (spatialized pattern). The poem, however, builds toward an unanticipated discontinuity—the tower “drops.” It is by collapsing the “chime” and the “drop” that the poem points to an unimaginable touch. Moreover, “crown of weeds” echoes “crown of thorns”: the poem substitutes its “truth” for the entry of the logos into time. Imagination signifies its own failure to imagine or anticipate time—even as this identification points to the time of a figure.

The tension between continuity and discontinuity recalls Dyer’s “Ruins of Rome”:

...The pilgrim oft
At dead of night, ‘mid his oraison hears
Aghast the voice of time, departing towers,
Tumbling all precipitate down-dashed,
Rattling around, loud thundering to the moon;
While murmers soothe each awful interval... (316)

The “murmurs” of rivers “soothe each awful interval,” as though maintaining continuity between soundings of “the voice of time.”

However, time, as destroyer, is also “adorned of the ruin,” as Byron famously put it. The discontinuity of destruction—and the continuity figured

by the growth of weeds, ivy and flowers—are aspects of the same power. Dyer figures ruin as the “voice of time” and flowing numbers (figured as rivers) “soothe each awful interval.” But in reading Wordsworth and Ashbery’s poetry, we will have trouble distinguishing between the continuities of flowing number and figure, and the discontinuities of ruin. The spectator who stands before ruin contemplates an entanglement of healing imagination and destructive time.

George Simmel notes that “Nature has used man’s work of art as the material for its own creation, just as art had previously taken nature as its raw material (qtd. in Matterson 51). In contrast to this reconciliation, consider Wordsworth’s self-conscious and ambivalent figures of nature’s touch and the “touch of time.” In Wordsworth’s 1824 poem “Composed Among the Ruins of a Castle in North Wales” we learn that time “upon these wounds hath laid/His lenient touches, soft as light that falls,/From the wan moon...” There is never any doubt that time is a destroyer here—but “his lenient touches” are distinct from the violence of “forgotten wars.” Abruptly, the speaker⁵ addresses the ruin: “Relic of Kings! Wreck of forgotten Wars,/To winds abandoned and the prying stars,/Time *loves* thee!” (41)

In “Inscriptions Supposed to be Found In and Near a Hermit’s Cell, 1818” the speaker finds inscribed on a rock the story of a “gorgeous pile,”

undermined by frost which, “with secret guile,” had rendered it “Unsound as those which fortune builds.” The weather warms, and the structure is “sapp’d by the very beam that gilds.” Even as the speaker gazed, “with sudden shock/Fell the whole fabric to the ground;/And naked left this dripping Rock/With shapeless ruin spread round!” The sun, taking the role of “truth,” destroys shape (figure) (K 265). Wordsworth returns to figures of adornment in “Memorials of a Tour in Italy, 1837” (C 255). The speaker addresses the wild flowers “that no one heeds,/And ye—full often spurned as weeds--/In beauty clothed.” Given that “weeds” also means clothing, weeds are “clothes clothed in beauty,” and clothing in beauty their capacity to undermine ruined buildings, and set up shocks of destruction. There is a sense in this poetry, that ruin stages the spectacle of power defending against its own shocks. The wild flowers “Do but more touchingly recall/Man’s headstrong violence and time’s fleetness”—even as they are implicated in the latter (C 255). The weeds and the frost, through “lenient touch” or “secret guile” remind us of sudden shocks of crashing ruin. Figural reconciliation, as a defense against “shocks” of language, points to its own implication in discontinuity: “lenient” touches are the touch of time, all the same.

A poem by Wordsworth brings all of these conceits together. In his (very) late poem, “At Furness Abbey” (written around 1844 or 1845), Wordsworth revisits the ruin of Furness Abbey, described in *The Prelude*. The faint “sobblings of the place” described in *The Prelude* (“the shuddering ivy dripped large drops”), and the lone wren who sang there, are transformed:

Here, where, of havoc tired and rash undoing
 Man left this Structure to become Time’s prey
 A soothing spirit follows in the way
 That Nature takes, her counter-work pursuing.
 See how her ivy clasps the sacred Ruin,
 Fall to prevent or beautify decay;
 And, on the mouldered walls, how bright, how gay,
 The flowers in pearly dew their bloom renewing!
 Thanks to the place, blessings upon the hour;
 Even as I speak the rising Sun’s first smile
 Gleams on the grass-crowned top of yon tall Tower
 Whose cawing occupants with joy proclaim
 Prescriptive title to the shattered pile
 Where, Cavendish, *thine* seems nothing but a name! (C 350)

The willful destruction visited upon the abbey, and the (absurdly long) chain of title that gave Cavendish ownership, are answered by nature in two ways. Ivy now has the power to prevent the walls from falling — although “Fall to prevent...” puts the emphasis on “Fall.” The “grass-crowned” tower emerges yet again as a stock element, touched now by the sun: another moving piece in what Paul de Man called a “tropological system” (as read,

for example, in Shelley's "The Triumph of Life," in "Shelley Disfigured"(93-123)).

Here, as in other of Wordsworth's poems on ruin, nature "recalls" and lays balm upon the destruction wrought by man and mutability by aestheticizing destruction. The cawing of the rooks is a claim to place from creatures who are themselves elements of that place: a performative short-circuit that fully incorporates the ruin into nature. Wordsworth wrote the poem in a pocket notebook alongside an earlier version in which we see him working out the paradox of "nature's counter-work":

Nature puts forth her gentle powers
to stay
And to adorn where there is no
renewing
Her ivy props this venerable Ruin
In beauteous [blank] of her kind in-
tent
And where are sweeter flowers than
over rent
Tottering or prostrate here her hand
is shewing (88)

The ivy that "props" the ruin does so by an echo that we find elsewhere in Wordsworth. The ivy is actually pulling the walls down, and was cleared from Furness Abbey for that reason, but it "props" the wall as a figure that "props" its reconciling power, or is oddly "self conscious" of it. Where we might read "beauteous sign of her kind intent," we get a blank. Yet it is the

final figure that seems the most self-conscious—in a way that crosses over now, from the “sublime” self-reference of imagination, to the “self-aware” figurality of John Ashbery. “Tottering or prostrate” describes the walls (and probably Wordsworth, as an old man), but via the indeterminate syntax in lines of a draft, instead describe the personified hand of nature: “Tottering or prostrate here her hand is shewing.” It is the kind of fragment that draws attention to itself by seeming to say something that the poet has repressed. The “amphibious work of Nature’s hand” is replaced now by nature’s hand itself, in ruin. One might easily imagine Ashbery lifting this line, and inscribing it in his own pocket notebook.

Ashbery and Wordsworth both present an imagination “aware” of its entanglement in chance events—the very mode in which nature “speaks,” according to Wordsworth, in a passage of *The Prelude* that I will analyze shortly. Consider, for example, the last line of Ashbery’s “What is Poetry?”: “It might give us—what?—some flowers soon?” (47) The line’s vernacular weirdness reanimates the cliché of flowers as a stock subject of poetry. The “it” personifies the poem as having an arbitrary temperament: it may or may not give us flowers—as though the speaker were expecting a delivery of flowers. Someone who has read Ashbery enough will suspect that the line is a fragment of conversation, and in an interview with Daniel Kane, Ashbery

does note that he heard a boy say it to a girl in a bookstore: “I...like it that the couple who were talking seemed to be lovers, so the line ‘It might give us—what?—some flowers soon?’ seemed to have special meaning for them” (Ashbery). The overheard lovers are “inside” of charged meaning, figural form, or forms of imagination. The eavesdropping poet, however, stands outside, struck by the obscure salience of the fragment.

We might fantasize that what the conversational fragment retains of the lover’s intensity is its own intensity or authoritative vector of intent—a characteristic of Ashbery’s poetry, even when it seems obscure. This “charge” attends the fragment in “What is Poetry?,” from Ashbery’s

Houseboat Days:

...In school
All the thought got combed out:

What was left was like a field.
Shut your eyes, and you can feel it for miles around.

Now open them on a thin vertical path.
It might give us—what?—some flowers soon? (47)

In the Kane interview, Ashbery remarks: “the ‘thin vertical path’ would be what suddenly appeared in your eyes as you open them after looking at a broad field, and the line would perhaps be a trellis, or the field about to flatten out again and burst into bloom” (Ashbery). We might recall the simile of the hop field from “Flow Blue” (written after the above lines), and

the “piano tuning” of the trellis. A poem is an open field whose openness hides things: it produces surprises.

Surprise is strongly linked to chance. For Ashbery, poetic effects arise from the senile drift of an old man’s memory, the distortion of whispered messages in a parlor game (“Chinese Whispers”), snatches of mis-heard or overheard conversation, and decontextualized echoes of the tradition. Fractured syntax, sliding of tenor under vehicle, and over-particularized personification also point to fluctuations of language. Rather than reading Ashbery’s interest in time as metaphysical or psychological, it is worth considering that in Ashbery’s poetry—as in Wordsworth’s—the “unimaginable touch of time” is the touch of figurality. Figurality registers its unimaginability by remaining one step behind its moment, thematizing it as an intersection with accident or mutability (including a mutability internal to language). Along similar lines, perception or understanding is always one step behind itself—grasping flux as the frozen snapshot of the “historical present”—and always “concerned with itself on another level.” Ashbery explicitly describes the structure in *Fantasia on the Nut-Brown Maid*:

But if each act
Is reflexive, concerned with itself on another level
As well as with us, the strangers who live here,
Can one advance one step further without sinking equally
Far back into the past? There was always something to see,
Something going on, for the historical past owed it

To itself, our historical present. Another month a huge
 Used-care sale on the lawn shredded the sense of much
 Of the sun coming through the wires, or a cape
 Would be rounded by a slim white sail almost
 Invisible in the specific design, or children would come
 Clattering down fire escapes until the margin
 Exploded into an ear of sky. Today the hospitals
 Are light, airy places, tented clouds, and the weeping
 In corridors is like autumn showers. It's beginning. (HD, 86-87)

The concluding images capture the sense of an unfolding present, slipping into a historical past—a situation captured by a reflexive figure: “the historical past owed it/To itself, our historical present.” What did the historical past owe itself? It owed image fragments, charged with obscure feelings—so that “there was always something to see.”

In Ashbery's lines above, the “huge/Used car sale on the lawn” suggests an entropic jumble, or excrescence of the “historical present”: it disrupts sense, or “shredded the sense of much/Of the sun coming through the wires.” The used car sale is a vehicle that buries its tenor under incongruous particularity; a signifier that overtakes its signified. Meaning is dimly perceived, even as the “slim white sail almost/invisible in the specific design” is dimly perceived and all the more sets up a sense of expectation—and a release of energy: “children would come/Clattering down fire escapes until the margin/Exploded into an ear of sky.” The violence of ear, substituted for sky, figures a shift that Geoffrey Hartman has highlighted in

Wordsworth: the emergence of voice. The final line describing the cloud hospitals is a lyric flash—as though an illness of language had been cured.

However, Ashbery second-guesses the lyric present in the next lines: “Unless this is the shelf of whatever happens?” A shelf is a repository for objects, and poetry collects them—even as it goes:

The cold sun-
rise attacks one side of the giant capital letters, bestirs a
little the landmass as it sinks, grateful but asleep. And you
too are a rebus from another century, your fiction in piles
like lace, in that a new way of appreciating has been in-
vented... (87)

The lines abstractly personify the impulse that drives them—a “you” whose “fiction in piles/like lace” is a pile of worn rhetorical ornamentation. In its place, we have the “cold sunrise,” “giant capital letters,” the “landmass,” and a “rebus from another century”—“a new way of appreciating has been invented.” This rebus has given us something to see: the ordinary made strange through a rebus-like knitting together of different orders (images and letters). The sun that “attacks one side of the giant capital letters” attacks the side of letters that is material and thing-like—like a landmass, or spectacle, witnessed without comprehension.

Image-making (“imagination”) in these terms, is not the active, eternal present of Blake’s “poet’s work,” which creates time. It is not the run-on process monologue of A.R. Ammons, marking time through jags of

improvisation and digression. Rather, Ashbery's image-making more resembles those moments when Ammons reflexively encounters imagination through the melancholy feeling that attends the refuse heap of used-up form. In English poetic tradition, the antecedents of Ashbery's images are Wordsworth's "objects recognised,/In flashes, and with glory not their own." Like Wordsworth, Ashbery approaches imagination by way of the "obscure feelings" that haunt its archaic index. For Ashbery, time is decontextualization, producing a "spot of time" with each moment, and although these spots are not visionary, they are haunted by what Wordsworth called "obscure feelings."

Like the memory image, the figural fragment signifies "absent" context that, in Ashbery's case, is structurally absent; i.e., lost by definition, or structurally lost (rather than "forgotten," for example, or "repressed"). Although Wordsworth claims to have experienced "vulgar joy" as a child, the situation is different in Ashbery's "The Instruction Manual," where the name "Guadalajara" no longer refers only to the city in Mexico, but also an absence around which the distracted office worker, compelled to "write the instruction manual on/the uses of a new metal," rears a fantasy world. Having entered a reverie of Guadalajara in a day dream, the speaker says: "What more is there to do but stay? And that we can-/not do" (18).

“Guadalajara” is a series of vague images to which obscure feelings are attached, and the speaker’s generic language is a comic effect that also maintains a strange melancholy: “dim Guadalajara! City of rose-colored flowers!/City I most wanted to see, and most did not see in Mexico!” (14) Even the flowers are once-removed: “rose-colored” describes the color of a flower with the color of a flower. Describing the flower girls—“Each attractive in her rose-and-blue striped dress (Oh! such shades of rose and blue)” the a sense of flatness and removal—and an effective parody of “colours and words that are unknown to man” (480).

There is a sense of flatness, removal, and occasional parody in Ashbery’s voice that dissuades the reader from looking for actual loss to explain a sense of loss and mystery that attends the language. Time opens a gap between the memory-image and meaning—and this is true as well, of the figural fragment: both are subject to mutability, and both generate an inexplicable ecstasy, melancholy and mystery; both project a reader who stands outside of figural “imagination,” or in the paradox of the obsessional, “inside-out”; a hovering between outside and inside that Ashbery has described as “fence sitting raised to an esthetic ideal.” From this angle, language is constantly slipping backward into the “de-contextualization” of the past—and trying to re-figure its originating “climate”; i.e., trying to

figure a “beginning” or “starting out” that has slipped into a nostalgia for “beginning”:

The being of our sentences, in the climate that fostered them,
Not ours to own, like a book, but to be with, and sometimes
To be without, alone and desperate.
But the fantasy makes it ours, a kind of fence-sitting
Raised to the level of an esthetic ideal (DDS 18)

“Fence-sitting” is the capacity of poetic language to blur the seemingly hard-and-fast distinction between foundational power and meaning—between accident and imagination. As a figure, “fence sitting” attacks dichotomizing that serves our attempts to conceptualize figurality, and is a reflexive trope by my definition. The fantasy that makes “the being of our sentences” ours is the fantasy that there is, in the partially “random” rebus puzzles offered up in Ashbery’s poetry, a partial meaning, or liminal middle ground between meaningless power and meaningful figure. Poetry stays “open” by maintaining the gap between accident and imagination, even while closing it in flashes, to create allegorical fragments, half sunk in particularity, or metaphor that interferes with its own analogical scaffolding, shredding “the sense of much/Of the sun coming through the wires.” The fantasy, in short, is that there would be something between noise and signal, or to invoke a different dichotomy, between the cry of the owls (nature’s sounds), and the articulate mimicry of the Winander boy (language).

Wordsworth invokes “the mystery of words” in his great speech on visionary power: “There, darkness makes abode, and all the host/Of shadowy things work endless changes.” “Endless changes”—echoing the “endless fluctuations and arbitrary associations” of language described in Wordsworth’s Essay Supplementary to the Preface of *Poems* of 1815—suggest the intersection of creativity and randomness that Ashbery invokes:

Even forms and substances are circumfused
By that transparent veil with light divine,
And through the turnings intricate of verse,
Present themselves as objects recognised,
In flashes, and with glory not their own. (1850 5.601-5, W 205)

Ashbery often highlights the mysterious salience of fragments: “Things overheard in cafes assumed an importance previously reserved for letters from the front” (HD, 87)). However, Ashbery is not a collector of flotsam, burnished by the tide. What Ashbery gets from Wordsworth’s speech on visionary power is its run-on vector of obscure intent—a working sea of deferred epiphany, in which archaic fragments (“viewless,” “circumfused”) bob to the surface.

Ashbery’s run-on speeches similarly fold back on themselves to manifest the power that they are talking about—as in the run-on address to the “rebus,” partially quoted above. This performative reflexivity seems to close the gap between power and meaning—as in Pope’s remark that

Longinus “is himself the great Sublime he draws.” Read as a reflexive figure, talk about power collapses into a manifestation of power—as though power might close the gap opened by the self-referential paradox of reflexive figurality. In the case of the decontextualized fragment, however, the conundrums of reflexive figurality are not resolved by an invocation of power, since power is the very thing “indexed” by the object; i.e., it is not “present” power.

Along these lines, the figural fragment, the conversational fragment, and the memory fragment share a common feature: they implicate figurality in what Wordsworth called “chance collisions and queer accidents.” Through these events, nature allegedly strengthened imagination in the child, and in Ashbery’s poetry as well, chance has a mysterious agency. Ashbery has said: “I really think that meaningfulness can’t get along without randomness and they somehow have to be brought together...” (Bloom, 65) In “Fantasia on “The Nut Brown Maid,” we read that “Time is sorting us all out.” (HD, 73) Ashbery frames accidents as figures and vice versa, collapsing time—along with its related notions of mutability and chance—into the time of a figure:

1. The time of chance collisions and quaint accidents.
2. The time of an imaginative event that transmutes accident into figural “surprise.”

In Wordsworth's famous account of crossing the Alps, the figural recuperation of accident is a self-referential figure: accidents are proleptic of a moment when they are figured as proleptic—a paradox (Warminski, 990).

In the long view of English poetic tradition, Wordsworth is a reference point for this entanglement of accident and imagination; notably, in the 1799 two-part *Prelude*:

...I might advert
To numerous accidents in flood or field,
Quarry or moor, or mid the winter snows,
Distresses and disasters, tragic facts
Of rural history that impressed my mind
With images to which in following years
Far other feelings were attached... (1799 1.279-85, W 15)

A related passage from the 1805 *Prelude* also makes a theme of accidents:

...The earth
And common face of nature spoke to me
Rememberable things—sometimes, 'tis true,
By chance collisions and quaint accidents
(Like those ill-sorted unions, work supposed
Of evil-minded fairies), yet not vain
Nor profitless if haply they impressed
Collateral objects and appearances,
Albeit lifeless then and doomed to sleep
Until maturer seasons called them forth
To impregnate and elevate the mind.
And if the vulgar joy by its own weight
Wearied itself out of the memory,
The scenes which were a witness of that joy
Remained in their substantial lineaments
Depicted on the brain, and to the eye
Were visible, a daily sight. And thus,
By the impressive discipline of fear,

By pleasure and repeated happiness —
 So frequently repeated — and by force
 Of obscure feelings representative
 Of joys that were forgotten, these same scenes,
 So beautiful and majestic in themselves,
 Though yet the day was distant, did at length
 Become habitually dear, and all
 Their hues and forms were by invisible links
 Allied to the affections. (1805 1.586-640, W 69-70)

The changeful face of Nature speaks through accidents that impress
 “rememberable things.” Yet works of nature already look like works of
 imagination; the “work supposed/Of evil-minded fairies” recalls the work of
 Mercutio’s Queen Mab, who “plats the manes of horses in the night/and
 bakes the elflocks in foul sluttish hairs,/Which once untangled much
 misfortunes bodes...” Insofar as accidents take the form of “ill-sorted
 unions,” they already resemble an accident of imagination—or the child has
 (mis)read catachrestic figurality as an alien power: he collapses accidents of
 figural imagination into accidents of nature from the beginning. This
 collapse could only be traumatic, and the child is already defending against
 it—alienated from imagination (“self-conscious” in Hartman’s formulation),
 experiencing a “self-consciousness,” proleptic of the speaker’s more
 developed self-awareness in the above lines.

The passage implicitly sets up a distinction between imagination,
 experienced from the “inside” as “vulgar joy,” “fear,” and “superstition,”

and imagination reflexively marked as a discrepancy between the banality of a scene, and the charge upon it. As reflexive trope, imagination entangles meta-imaginative dichotomies that distinguish between the “inside” and “outside” of imagination, past and present, impressive power vs. impression (via Locke and associationist doctrine). Imagination, for Wordsworth, is characteristically reflexive, or encountered through an unstable discrepancy between natural objects that usurp imagination and an imagination that threatens to overwhelm the thingness of the thing-world in its autonomous violence. Along these lines, the entanglement of mind and nature is marked by a “too-muchness” or “not-enoughness” implicit in their relation, thematized in Geoffrey Hartman’s readings as a consciousness of consciousness—or “link,” in Wordsworth, between consciousness and imagination.

As “accident,” imagination registers its traumatic or alien aspect—a disruptive moment, spatialized through images, or “spots of time.” These images are charged by “obscure feelings representative/Of joys that were forgotten.” How were these joys forgotten? Wordsworth deploys a starkly reflexive image: “*the vulgar joy by its own weight/Wearied itself out of the memory...*” There is, finally, something unsustainable or even unbearable about present joy, or the experience of being “inside” of it as an informing or

meaningful passion. Imagination turns inside-out, or stands outside of itself. Instead of taking the form of “vulgar joy,” “fear” or “superstition,” imagination represents those very feelings, with “obscure feelings.” Thus, the child experiences imagination as “vulgar joy,” “superstition,” or “fear,” and when these feelings are forgotten, they leave behind “obscure feelings” as their representative: *feelings represent feelings*, as though imagination were defending against itself. As James Chandler has put it, “the vulgar emotions that were responsible for impressing the image in the first instance also continue to have a life in the mind even after they have wearied themselves out of memory. They are “re-presented” there by (or as)...“obscure feelings” associated with the mind’s surviving images (209).

In what sense does the spot of time retain a life in the mind, or a “renovating virtue”? Via geological trope, the memory-fragment resembles the glacial erratic figured in “Resolution and Independence” as a “sea beast”: marooned atop an eminence as resistant cap-stone, it seems to have dragged itself up there, or acquired an uncanny agency. The spot of time acquires a “pre-eminent virtue,” as Wordsworth calls it elsewhere: it is a strange-attractor of associations, or a repeated metaphorical substitution that never quite catches up to its meaning. In Wordsworth’s formulation, the spot of

time is “By the impressive discipline of fear,/By pleasure and repeated happiness—/So frequently repeated.”

A famous example of such a repeated image is a childhood memory of a spot beneath the Penrith beacon, where “a murderer had been hung in iron chains”:

The gibbet-mast had mouldered down, the bones
And iron-case were gone; but on the turf,
Hard by, soon after that fell deed was wrought,
Some unknown hand had carved the murderer’s name
The monumental letters were inscribed
In times long past; but still, from year to year,
By superstition of the neighborhood,
The grass is cleared away, and to this hour
The characters are fresh and visible:
A casual glance had shown them, and I fled,
Faltering and faint, and ignorant of the road...
(1850 12.237-247, W 481)

The appearance and re-appearance of the monumental letters recalls the repetition that makes the spots of time appear and re-appear. “The grass is cleared away” to reveal “characters...fresh and visible,” even as Wordsworth clears away the ornamentation of poetic language to lay bare generic words—“turf,” “grass” “characters,” “road.”

What is laid bare on the turf by clearing the grass are characters that draw attention to the “superstition” that inscribed them. To “character” already has this reflexive sense—to “character” is to inscribe, and when “presences of nature” had “impressed upon all forms the characters/Of

danger and desire,” such characters derive their force from indexing force—by blurring inarticulate charactering and articulate characters, so as to index foundational violence. When the child reads such characters, rational meaning gives way to an overwhelming feeling of salience—and he flees. Power threatens to collapse into meaning that is annihilating—happening in the moment of a “casual glance.”

When the speaker looks back over the years, he maintains a gap between meaning and power: he characterizes meaning as lost meaning and power as a charged series of image-fragments—as in the climax of the scene beneath Penrith beacon:

...I fled,
 Faltering and faint, and ignorant of the road:
 Then, reascending the bare common, saw
 A naked pool that lay beneath the hills,
 The beacon on the summit, and, more near,
 A girl, who bore a pitcher on her head,
 And seemed with difficult steps to force her way
 Against the blowing wind. It was in truth,
 An ordinary sight; but I should need
 Colours and words that are unknown to man,
 To paint the visionary dreariness
 Which, while I looked all round for my lost guide,
 Invested moorland waste, and naked pool,
 The beacon crowning the lone eminence,
 The female and her garments vexed and tossed
 By the strong wind. (11.246-61, W 481)

“Visionary dreariness” is a quality that would bring these images together as a scene and perhaps explain their salience: it functions as synecdochical

power, and the poet would need “Colours and words that are unknown to man” to paint it. However, this is to be “outside” of synecdoche rather than “inside” it—signifying it, in its indescribability, by the words “naked,” “bare,” “dreary,” “pool” and “wall.” Through repeated readings of the above passage, these words abstract themselves from context to signify the power that impressed them.

“It was in truth/An ordinary sight,” as Wordsworth remarks of “the naked pool and dreary crags,” but the figurality of “pool” and “crag”—like that of Ashbery’s “huge used car sale”—is that of a signifier, salience, or mode of vehicular transport that eclipses the signified, or meaning. We might imagine that what figural language “reflexively” operates on—or plays upon—are distinctions that set up the possibility of meaning; as though a signifier might point to the abstract place that it occupies in a system or game, or point to the abstract notion of a signified instead of a particular signified. These contemporary scenarios stage the self-pointing of language, much as Wordsworth’s *Blind Beggar* does with his label (“Wearing a written paper to explain/The story of the man and who he was” (7.613-14)).

Through this label, the beggar is pointing less to himself, and more to a distinction between himself and his label that threatens to collapse, inasmuch as he is labeled “Blind” as the allegorical personification of fear is labeled

“FEAR.” Along these lines Knapp notes the beggar’s “preternatural self-enclosure...the abstract and formal reflexivity of sublime personification “ insofar as his “identity is wholly absorbed by the inscription he literally wears around his neck” (Knapp 99). More fundamentally, Neil Hertz reads the Blind Beggar as “an emblem of minimal difference”: “the beggar triangulates the poet’s self in relation to his double [the beggar], who is represented for a moment, as an emblem of minimal difference fixed in relation to itself” (Hertz 57).

In the case of Ashbery, it is the “minimal difference” between meaning and figurality that he would highlight: the opening and closing of that gap, in its temporality, allegedly allows us—in highly privileged moments—to be aware of a “now” while we are in it. This awareness requires a particular affective attunement and discipline: “Those/Suffering from the blahs are unlikely to notice that the topic/Of today’s lecture doesn’t exist yet” (74). Rather than grasping the topic of a lecture, we would be with “the being of our sentences, in the climate that fostered them”: we would be inside of a “climate,” a feeling that spring is arriving, or a “new weather,” as Ashbery describes it in “A Wave”:

And some day perhaps the discussion that has to come
In order for us to start feeling any of it before we even
Start to think about it will arrive in a new weather
Nobody can imagine but which will happen just as the ages

Have happened without causing total consternation (73)

Ashbery is describing a renovating power of life and language, “breathing mystery back into all the sterile/Living that had to lead up to it” (73).

“Without causing total consternation” humorously undercuts any sense that this is a revolutionary renewal:

...Moments as clear as water
 Splashing on a rock in the sun, though in darkness, and then
 Sleep has to affirm it and the body is fresh again,
 For the trials and dangerous situations that any love,
 However well-meaning, has to use as terms in the argument
 That is the reflexive play of our living and being lost
 And then changed again (73)

Ashbery deliberately avoids using the word “memory” in this extended sequence from “A Wave,” but the passage nonetheless invites us to read “reflexive play” as the play of remembered images, decontextualized by “sleep,” and re-emerging as emblems of power with a renovating virtue.

What is the “it” that sleep affirms? Possibly, “it” is “love,” a “new weather,” a memory-image, or the “obscure feelings” attached to “moments”—but the word “it” is also a reflexive figure with an obscure antecedent. It lacks context that would explain its meaning, and therefore functions in the above lines just like the “moments” that it is describing.

Earlier in the poem, the speaker asserts that “the waves talk to us,/Preparing dreams we’ll have to live with and use”:

I became as a parent to those scenes lifted from “real life.” There was the quiet time
 In the supermarket, and the pieces
 Of other people’s lives as they sashayed or tramped past
 My own section of a corridor, not pausing
 In many cases to wonder where they were—maybe they even knew. (72)

The meditation continues:

True, those things or moments of which one
 Finds oneself an enthusiast, a promoter, are few,
 But they last well,
 Yielding up their appearances for form
 Much later than the others (72)

The tone here is removed—the “enthusiast” or “promoter” of things and moments is humorously detached. There is no focus on visionary salience; rather, a connoisseurship. The reference to “form” emerges again in “A Wave,” as I will show, and seems here to describe images resistant to the erosion of memory. Yet the language is deliberately abstract: it is highlighting a structure, not a theme or a doctrine—it is not “about” memory, or the spots of time. The speaker later distinguishes himself from Wordsworth (or someone like him):

And though there are some who leave regularly
 For the patchwork landscape of childhood, north of here,
 Our own kind of stiff standing around, waiting helplessly
 And mechanically for instructions that never come, suits the space
 Of our intense, uncommunicated speculation (76)

Although the alienation of urban life leaves us “standing on one leg while emerging continually/Into an inexpressive void” (76), its moments of emptiness also suit speculation about an originary void of language:

All those days had a dumb clarity that was about getting out
 Into a remembered environment. The headlines and economy
 Would refresh for a moment as you look back over the heap
 Of rusted box springs with water under them, and then,
 Like sliding up to a door or a peephole a tremendous advantage
 Would burst like a bubble. Toys as solemn and knotted as books
 Assert themselves first... (72)

The catalog feels like a descent into a liminal realm between sleep and waking. The “tremendous advantage” is the freedom opened up by the concrete opacity of “the heap/Of rusted box springs with water under them”—language that begins to signify opaquely, liberating itself from “dumb clarity.” There is harshness in the comparison of “sliding up to a door or a peephole” and “a tremendous advantage/Would burst like a bubble.” To “fix” the lines we might write: “sliding up to a door or a peephole/we see a tremendous advantage/burst like a bubble.” But, the lack of fit in the simile is just what opens up the advantage—“like” a peephole. The “knotted toys” seem like knots of reason, externalized as playthings, and they “assert themselves” like the trees of “Some Trees” and the pancake clock, constituting the speaker, or his subject-position.

These images put cracks in the dumb clarity of form; however, the sense of threshold meaning gives way to the “remembered environment” of work and obligations—and “reminders to be better next time”:

And this would spell out a warm business letter urging us
 All to return to our senses, to the matter of the day
 That was ending now. And no special sense of decline ensued
 But perhaps a few moments of music of such tact and weariness
 That one awakens with a new sense of purpose (72)

Ashbery’s poetry is designed to train our ears to hear “a few moments of music of such tact and weariness...”—it recalls the climbing and descending scale in Wordsworth’s “Mutability,” which is heard by uncorrupted ears.

The speaker of “A Wave” is especially attuned to its cycles:

Meanwhile I have turned back
 Into that dream of rubble that was the city of our starting out (74)

The “dream of rubble” is our waking world of “dumb clarity”—but its “dream-like” aspect suggests that there are charmed fragments amid the rubble, that remind us of “the city of our starting out”—or “the being of our sentences, in the climate that fostered them” (DDS 18). It is the mysterious capacity of the fragment to index “beginning” that drives Ashbery’s poetry, rather than any present feeling of “beginning” expressed in a lyric flight.

“Beginning” or “starting out” is an important figure in Ashbery’s poetry. “The mooring of starting out” is the *constancy* of “starting out” as a figure of linguistic renovation or renewal; “starting out” is a form of being

and desire, although Ashbery most characteristically keeps it in past tense — or indexes it through figural drift. Even when the poetry evokes a feeling of renewal or heightened sensitivity to ordinary particulars, Ashbery displaces it as a possibility that is elsewhere:

...I can
Hear the dust at the pores of the wood, and know then
The possibility of something more liberated and gracious
Though not of this time. (77)

Elsewhere in *A Wave*, Ashbery figures a sense of expectation but adds a *caveat*: “The past absconds/With our fortunes just as we were rounding a major/Bend in the swollen river” (78) We might imagine here, that the sense of something beginning—or something new about to arrive—structurally necessitates the defense of the past. The past defends against the intersection of figurality and accident—almost instantaneously—by re-establishing a “remembered environment” and “dumb clarity”:

Your finger traces a
Bleeding violet line down the columns of an old directory and to this spongy
State of talking things out a glass exclamation point opposes
A discrete claim: forewarned. So the voluminous past
Accepts, recycles our claims to present consideration
And the urban landscape is once again untroubled, smooth
as wax. (78)

The poetry performs (and describes) renovating language as the tracing of “a/Bleeding violet line down the columns of an old directory”—but it is already undercutting itself by characterizing itself as “this spongy/State of

talking things out.” The figural surprise of the “glass exclamation point”—its insistence as a pretty object—is already serving as a warning about the encroaching past; a warning that the past will recycle claims to the present based on just this kind of figural swerve: it will bind figurality more tightly to ideas, and separate metaphor from mistake. As the passage continues, however, we learn that: “As soon as the oddity is flushed out/It becomes monumental and anxious once again...” (78)

When language intersects with mutability to partially efface meaning—it recovers the sense of “starting out.” In “Soonest Mended” Ashbery ends with the lines: “Making ready to forget, and always coming back/To the mooring of starting out, that day so long ago” (DDS 18)). “Forgetting” here is the erasure of a “remembered environment,” and an attempt to recover a pure creative potential that is not quite our own. In contrast, the lines below from *A Wave* describe an attempt to maintain a “feeling of security” (75):

...only the absence of memory
 Animates us as we walk briskly back and forth
 At one with the souless, restless crowd on the somber avenue.
 Is there something new to see, to speculate on? Dunno, better
 Stand back until something comes along to explain it,
 This curious lack of anxiety that begins to gnaw
 At one. Did it come because happiness hardened everything
 In its fire, and so the forms cannot die, like a ruined
 Fort too strong to be pulled down? And something like pale
 Alpine flowers still flourishes there

Some reminder that can never be more than this (75)

The “lack of anxiety that begins to gnaw,” does so because it begins to demand an explanation of what “animates us.” The speaker imagines that “happiness hardened everything/In its fire,” leaving behind “some reminder that can never be more than this.” It as though there were a lost or forgotten happiness marked now by pale reminders. Yet, “absence of memory” is not a forgetting of happiness, but a repression necessary to sustain a minimal “lack of anxiety” in the drone of city life. This uncertainty recurs in Ashbery’s poetry as a mode of being in the “urban landscape.” But what does it defend against?

“Absence of memory” is a repression of “the poem”:

But always and sometimes questioning the old modes
And the new wondering, the poem, growing up through the floor
Standing tall in tubers, invading and smashing the ritual
Parlor, demands to be met on its own terms now,
Now that the preliminary negotiations are at last over (79)

The “ritual/Parlor” seems readable as the routines and repetitions of life, and its uncertainty: “Our own kind of stiff standing around, waiting helplessly/And mechanically for instructions that never come” (76). The poem smashes all of that, and like the alien vitality of plant-life, it is figured here as a force of ruin. To meet the poem on its own terms is to be projected

as a reader who occupies an impossible moment: the moment when the intersection of creativity and randomness (time) would be read:

...there is no point
 In looking out over the yard where tractors run,
 The empty space in the endless continuum
 Of time has come up: the space that can be filled only by you. (79)

For Wordsworth, a very different reflexive encounter with imagination marks time, and although there is no thematic comparison to the scenes I have read in Ashbery, a structural homology emerges when we consider that continuity and discontinuity, space and time, metaphor and mistake, are among the meta-imaginative oppositions that imagination interrupts to signal its power. In aestheticizing or spiritualizing that self-encounter, the poet finds a “renovating virtue,” or a sense of “beginning.”

4. Tenor, Vehicle and Blake

Nothing could be farther from Ashbery than Blake, although the reader might note a formal similarity in Blake’s use of figures. There are leaps of catachresis, and instances of run-on “over-particularization,” in which vehicle begins to overwhelm tenor, developing its own narrative momentum. Blake’s reflexive figures index an obscure power, born of repressed energy. At other times, they can point to energy, overrunning rhetorical form. As I read Ashbery at the end of the last section, he seems to ask: how is power repressed? What would a lifting of repression mean for

the subject? In what follows, I examine how Blake situates these themes through reflexive figures.

In *The Book of Ahania*, the speaker compares Urizen's "dire contemplations" to "floods," but the simile bleeds into description of an actual flood and its consequences. The vehicle of the simile begins to bury the tenor under its "overparticularization" (to borrow a formulation of John Ashbery, who also uses the device):

For his dire Contemplations
Rush'd down like floods from his mountains
In torrents of mud settling thick
With Eggs of unnatural production
Forthwith hatching; some howl'd on his hills
Some in vales; some aloft flew in the air

Of these: an enormous dread Serpent
Scaled and poisonous horned
Approach'd Urizen even to his knees
As he sat on his dark rooted Oak.

With his horns he push'd furious.
Great the conflict & great the jealousy
In cold poisons: but Urizen smote him

First he poison'd the rocks with his blood
Then polish'd his ribs, and his sinews
Dried; laid them apart till winter;
Then a Bow black prepar'd: On this Bow,
A poisoned rock plac'd in silence... (2.7-24, E 84)

"For his dire Contemplations/Rush'd down like floods" is a simile that extends for many lines, but the flood of mud propagates metamorphoses—

even while becoming a flood of words that bleed into description. The “Eggs of unnatural production” are products of perverted sexual-imaginative energy. They also appear in *The Four Zoas*, where Los—the vehicular form of imagination in the fallen world—hatches them: “His broodings rush down to his feet producing Eggs that hatching/Burst forth upon the winds above the tree of Mystery” (81.8-9, E 349).

Thus the anomalous, reifying effect of Urizen’s “dire Contemplations” is rhetorical—albeit not a figure we will find in a handbook; rather, it is the kind of figure that disrupts classical rhetoric. A line break marks the discrepancy between figural and literal senses of “poison”—even as a reflexive trope blurs the two senses:

...great the jealousy
In cold *poisons*: but Urizen smote him

First he *poison’d* the rocks with his blood [my italics]

“In cold poisons” metaphorically associates jealousy with poison, but “First he poison’d the rocks with his blood” reifies the figure: Urizen literally poisons a rock that he will fashion into a projectile to smite his son, Fuzon, a figure of sexual and revolutionary energy. Why is this a reflexive trope? Metaphor slips into metamorphosis, and thereby disrupts rational understanding as a “repressed” form of imagination, alienated from human

desire and understanding (an interpretation meant to capture the sense of Blake's myth).

The shift from metaphor to metamorphosis recalls Blake's famous lyric "A Poison Tree," in which a metaphorically poisoned apple kills the speaker's literal enemy.

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow. (E 28)

"Wrath" could be an active form of desire, such as the wrath of the prophet, but the speaker did not tell his wrath. Instead, he repressed it in imitation of the passive "reactor" and "accuser" Satan, who tempts humanity with the tree of Knowledge. The speaker's repression recalls the repression of metaphorically sympathetic imagination in Blake's lyric "The Human Abstract," and as in that poem, it "grows" a tree of Mystery.

Does the speaker's wrath "grow" metaphorically or literally?

And I watered it in fears,
Night and morning with my tears;
And I sunned it with smiles,
And with soft deceitful wiles.

And it grew both day and night,
Till it bore an apple bright.
And my foe beheld it shine.
And he knew that it was mine,

And into my garden stole

When the night had veiled the pole;
 In the morning glad I see
 My foe outstretched beneath the tree. (E 28)

The “apple bright” has the fetishistic shine of reified metaphoricity. The tree “bore” the apple in the mode of Blake’s early allegory, “And She *bore* Pale desire” [my italics] (E 436), which describes a birth-contraction that is also a contraction of power. In “A Poison Tree,” this power operates behind the scenes “when night had veild the pole,” and the poem’s power would be diminished if Blake had parted this veil, allowing the speaker to describe the foe eating the poisoned apple. Instead, darkness veils the transmutation of wrath into poison: a metaphorical apple kills the speaker’s literal enemy.

The poem stages an equivocation between:

1. *Metaphorical* transformation of the speaker’s wrath into a poisoned apple.
2. *Metamorphosis* of his wrath into a poisoned apple.

The blurring of #1 and #2 above is a reflexive trope: *figural* imagination blurs a *meta-figural* distinction between metaphor and metamorphosis. The apple figures the growth of repressed wrath into poison; however, this growth is also literal.

The equivocation points to the work of an irrational power, alienated from human understanding and desire. Thus there is a kernel of incomprehensibility in Blake’s rhetoric of materialization. Blake thematizes

this gap as Urizen's "oblivion," his "stony sleep," and his astonished reaction to self-begotten monsters. In *The Book of Ahania*, Urizen's repressed power torments him as the tree of Mystery's growth, which he reacts to as incomprehensible metamorphosis:

For when Urizen shrunk away
 From Eternals, he sat on a rock
 Barren; a rock which himself
 From redounding fancies had petrified
 Many tears fell on the rock,
 Many sparks of vegetation;
 Soon shot the pained root
 Of Mystery, under his heel:
 It grew a thick tree; he wrote
 In silence his book of iron:
 Till the horrid plant bending its boughs
 Grew to roots when it felt the earth
 And again sprung to many a tree.

Amaz'd started Urizen! When
 He beheld himself compassed round
 And high roofed over with trees (3.55-70, E 85)

Urizen is not initially aware of the tree's growth—it droops branches to the ground and shoots up new trees, roofing him over, and only then is he "Amaz'd." By constraining living form (spirit) with dead law, Urizen triggers a labyrinthine outgrowth, readable as the wilderness of repressive religious doctrine—the law of Aaron and Moses, which represses the passionate and apocalyptic aspect of imagination. This outgrowth is an unconscious production, and Urizen is therefore "amaz'd" by it. His shock

is a stock element of Blake's story about reflexive imagination, along with a reflexive locution ("beheld himself"), self-limitation ("compassed round"), a foreclosure of speech ("he wrote/In silence his book of iron") and the self-begetting of metamorphosis ("Till the horrid plant bending its boughs/Grew to roots..."). The crux of self-reference is repressed power, obstructing itself with its own index—the Druidic oak. The self-obstruction of imagination—and the obstruction of nature—are structurally connected: "nature" is the name of a reflexive blind spot.

I have claimed, however, that there is something incomprehensible about the scene of productive power, "obscured" by its own production: "Mystery" names this blind spot in Blake's poetry, and *The Tree of Mystery* therefore stands for many mysteries, including that of original sin, the veiled ark, and the mystery of nature (the obscure, self-pointing of power is implicit in each). The image of this tree is from Milton's description of the tree in Paradise, based on images of a Banyon tree: "A pillar'd shade High overarch'd, and echoing walks between" (9.1105, 233)—a passage of Milton that interested Coleridge in Chapter 22 of *Biographia Literaria* (129) as a transmutation of aural echo into visual image. Banyon trees bend their bows to take up root—an uncanny agency readable as perverse figurality or imagination: the living form of energy, repressed and returning as the

parodic life of nature. “Echoing walks” is Milton’s aural echo of the tree’s self-begetting propagation. In Blake’s poetry, however, the tree’s redounding figures the solipsism of Urizen. When he “shrunk away/from Eternals” he sat “on a rock which himself/From redounding fancies had petrified,” and enjambment intensifies the echo, suggesting that Urizen petrified himself: “*himself*/From redounding fancies had petrified” [my italics].

Moreover, Urizen’s tears of pity feed the tree’s growth...

Many tears fell on the rock,
Many sparks of vegetation (3.59-60, E 85)

...in the way that jealous tears feed the poison tree’s growth:

And I waterd it in fears,
Night & morning with my tears (E 28)

The speaker “waterd” his wrath in a metaphorical sense, and in a *metamorphical* sense as well—he grew his wrath into a physical symptom, rather than transmuting its energy into speech (“I told my wrath, my wrath did end” (E 28)).

When repressed, tropological forms of desire re-emerge as the mute speech of a suffering body. In *The Book of Urizen*, Urizen suffers “dire changes” and the collapse of metaphor and metamorphosis signifies the

unconscious nature of the symptom. In “stony sleep” Urizen suffers metamorphosis; he is like “a dark waste stretching chang’able”:

Ages on ages roll’d over him!
 In stony sleep ages roll’d over him!
 Like a dark waste stretching chang’able
 By earthquakes riv’n, belching sullen fires
 On ages roll’d ages in ghastly
 Sick torment; around him in whirlwinds
 Of darkness the eternal Prophet howl’d... (4[b] 1-7, E 73)

It is (again) worth noting Blake’s anomalous use of simile: Urizen is like a “dark waste”—A is like B—but B soon “thickens” into a materialized landscape that begets its own phenomena—effacing the simile. The “dark waste stretching chang’able” is Urizen, stretched out like his children in *The Four Zoas*, or like the serpent form of Orc, crucified on the Tree of Mystery in the same poem, suffering his extension in time and space. Changeable waste is also changeable language and its arbitrary fluctuations—akin here to ongoing geological catastrophe. Thomas Burnet’s “Sacred Theory of the Earth” was a popular nineteenth-century treatise that linked the fall of humanity to a breaking of symmetrical perfection in the features of the unfallen earth (5-105). Blake revises Burnett by presenting geological change as symptoms in the fallen body of humanity; i.e., that part of humanity that is outside of imagination, human existence or what is called “Eternity” in *The Book of Urizen*. This physical realm—the realm of the

body—is where repressed metaphorical desire (“prolific” energy) presents itself as a somatic symptom, or a writing on the body.

The distinction between metaphor and metamorphosis is among the dichotomies that limit and rationalize metaphor, and when metaphor overflows its own definition by collapsing into metamorphosis, it signifies its own power self-referentially. The image of “overflowing” or “flooding” figures this self-pointing of metaphorical “energy.” Thus, Urizen’s “dire Contemplations/Rush’d down like floods” in *The Book of Ahania*—an effect of *repressed* metaphorical energy. In the description below from *The Four Zoas*, “the Springs/Flow into rivers of delight” (335). This is the unconstrained energy of “Orc”—a virility and abundance that exceeds the chains of form:

His nostrils breathe a fiery flame. His locks are like the forests
Of wild beasts there the lion glares the tiger and wolf howl there
And there the Eagle hides her young in cliffs & precipices
His bosom is like starry heaven expanded all the stars
Sing round. there waves the harvest & the vintage rejoices. the Springs
Flow into rivers of delight. There the spontaneous flowers
Drink laugh & sing. the grasshopper the Emmet & the Fly
The gold Moth builds there a house & spreads her silken bed

His loins inwove with silken fires are like a furnace fierce
As the strong Bull in summer time when bees sing round the heath
Where the herds low after the shadow & after the water spring
The numerous flocks cover the mountain & shine along the valley
(61.24-62.4, E 335)

The speaker compares Orc's loins to those of a bull, but the simile shifts (with the word "where") into a description of lowing and shining herds. Orc's locks are "like the forests/Of wild beasts," and Blake twice uses "there," as if to reify the forest, and the harvest that waves "there" in his bosom. The use of "there," "there," "there," "where..." overflow Blake's use of simile, to imply a world out "there."

Orc slips the chains imposed on him by fallen imagination: "His limbs bound down mock at his chains for over them a flame/Of circling fire unceasing plays to feed them with life..." (334) In describing Orc's energy, Blake's language presents the thing it describes: his language exceeds decorum. Yet visionary power becomes aberrant when it operates on the meta-visionary oppositions that regulate healthy imagination, becoming "reflexive." These oppositions are familiar to a reader of Blake:

1. Prolific and devourer
2. Contrary and negation
3. Center and circumference

Even as the distinction between use and mention, metaphor and metamorphosis, tenor and vehicle, are subject to a reflexive turn of tropes, visionary power is subject to a reflexive turn, or what Milton O. Percival called a "self-limitation" of imagination (123). Thus, Blake begins to tell a

story about reflexive figurality: certain reflexive turns—those that deform the three oppositions listed above—trigger the fall of humanity.

In “A Memorable Fancy” from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, the speaker states:

...one portion of being, is the Prolific. the other, the Devouring:
to the devourer it seems as if the producer was in his chains, but it is
not so, he only takes portions of existence and fancies that the whole.
(16, E 39)

The devourer transmutes prolific power into conceptual abstractions; on the other hand, “the Prolific would cease to be Prolific unless the Devourer as a sea received the excess of his delights” (16. E 39). In the description of Orc’s energy however, we recall that “the Springs/Flow into rivers of delight,” but these rivers have no “sea” to receive them. The “excess” delight of Orc is not contained—his unbound energy is not in a productively contrary relation to form. Instead, Orc devours his own energy, “turning affection to fury & thought into abstraction”; he is a trope of aberrant tropological reflexivity:

...Orc began to organize a Serpent body
Despising Urizen’s light & turning it into flaming fire
Receiving as a poisoned Cup Receives the heavenly wine
And turning affection into fury & thought into abstraction
A Self consuming dark devourer rising into the heavens
(80.44-48, E 349)

The passage suggests that Orc is coiling back on himself with hints of the tail-eating snake, or Ouroboros. Orc's "self consuming" transmutes the tropological form of his wrath into cycles of historical violence—an outward form of metamorphosis, manifested by his serpent body. The "poisoned cup" of communion emphasizes this perversion of metaphorical energy into metamorphic change: communion is a miraculous identity rather than metaphor.

What is the nature of Orc's fallen reflexivity—or "self consuming"? Doctrinally, Blake claims that "Devouring" transmutes metaphor into ideas that serve understanding, and darkly so, when it substantializes them; for example by reifying a distinction between body and soul. Blake develops this conceit in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, through the voice of the Devil: "Man has no Body distinct from his Soul for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age" (34). The self-discernment (self consuming) of soul produces the illusion of the body as something separate, or extended into the abyss of materiality. The Devil describes a fallen reflexivity, but he himself is an example of it; through him, "energy" abstracts itself as a portion of existence which threatens to acquire a separate life. When the Devil describes energy as "the *only* life" [my italics] and "Eternal delight" ("Energy is the only life

and is from the Body and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy” (34) he suggests the kind of absolutist and “overflowing” tendency of energy that pushes Orc beyond the “bounds” or “circumference” of form.

Thus, the crux of the Devil’s account is the soul’s self-blinded self-discernment: the soul discerns its “outward” and materialized form through contracted senses; it discerns a portion of itself (the body) as separate. Nature is a similar symptom—“discerned” by the senses as a separate, material reality, or mortified body, “stretched out” in space and time, and Blake’s prophecies emphasize the reflexive paradox buried in this notion: human existence—or imagination—is outside of itself when visionary power “contracts” (limits its power—or form). Shifting from reflexive trope to oxymoron: when visionary power contracts, it *contracts outward* to roll out the sprawl of Newtonian space and time. Thus, Orc’s body symbolizes the part of the body of humanity that has fallen, extended into linear time and space (contracted outward) and Urizen materializes this fall by extending Orc on the Tree of Mystery:

He knew that weakness stretches out in breadth & length he knew
That wisdom reaches high & deep & therefore he made Orc
In Serpent form compell’d stretch out & up the mysterious tree
(81. 2-4, E 349)

When Orc represses the tropological form of his desire by “devouring” it, he underwent a metamorphosis—he “began to Organize a Serpent body

(80.44, E 349).” The appearance of Orc’s serpent form inaugurates the fallen cyclicity of natural process and history—which has a visual analog in the serpent coils constraining Adam in Blake’s painting (analyzed at the beginning of Chapter 1). Orc’s self-coiling figures a pathological “self devouring” of the infinite: by transmuting Urizen’s energy into “fury,” Orc becomes Urizenic—he “devours” his eternal, prophetic-poetic wrath to produce historical violence.

In the historical allegory, Orc’s metamorphosis stands for the French Revolution’s degeneration into carnage—his prophetic wrath becomes reactive aggression. In the passage above, Orc begins disappearing into allegorical personification, snake-symbol, or degraded parody—with echoes of Milton’s Satan. The fullness of Orc as a mythic being, crucified on the tree of nature, and the flatness of Orc as symbol, are not reconciled in the above passage. Rather, a collapse of mythic being into “flat” symbol signifies something formally incomprehensible about the Blakean fall. The tension between Orc’s mythic “fullness” and his symbolic “flatness” recalls the metamorphorphic turn of Urizen’s children; personifications of elemental forces who acquire pathetic depth by enduring punishment or mortification of the body. Urizen himself makes the connection between Orc and his children: in compelling Orc to stretch out, Urizen “knew” that

weakness “stretches out in breadth & length (81.2, E 349).” This is because he has already seen his own weakness—his alienated children—“sometimes stretchd out in heighth/Sometimes in length sometimes englobing wandering in vain...” (340) Put succinctly, the collapse of (mythic) fullness into (allegorical) flatness is an index of perverted power.

Thus when Orc takes serpent form as a “self-consuming Dark devourer,” his self-begetting metamorphosis reminds us of changes suffered by Urizen. Orc’s serpent body is “outside” of eternal imagination, and subject to “dire changes,” but more fundamentally, imagination is “outside” of itself. When the soul discerns a materialized body through contracted (materialized) senses—it discerns itself as “other.” Like Urizen, Orc begins to discern himself as external to integrated humanity: he forgets his unfallen form (“Luvah”).

In describing Orc’s energy, Blake’s language presents the thing it describes: his language exceeds decorum—vehicle overtakes tenor. Blake is not celebrating the infinite capacity of vision to exceed all boundaries however. Rather, he tells a very specific story about energy: it becomes aberrant when it disrupts meta-visionary constraints that regulate it. What does healthy imagination look like? What is it to annihilate the selfhood in apocalyptic forms of desire—yet not fall into a self-consuming abyss (as Orc

does—or as Robespierre did)? Blake’s poetry ostensibly allows the reader to understand this for herself by “rouzing the faculties to act.” However, Blake’s vision of vision is also reflexive; i.e., he shows us the “inside” of visionary power from the “outside”—encouraging the reader to identify with forms of vision that are dormant in her. By presenting “inside” from “outside,” Blake can frame his rhetoric with a doctrine of meta-visionary form.

This is what Blake attempts in Ahania’s lament, from *The Book of Ahania*. In this speech, Ahania describes her unfallen union with Urizen—before he became possessed by selfishness and shame:

When he gave my happy soul
To the sons of eternal joy:
When he took the daughters of life.
Into my chambers of love:

When I found babes of bliss on my beds.
And bosoms of milk in my chambers
Fill’d with eternal seed
O! eternal births sung round Ahania,
In interchange sweet of their joys.

Swell’d with ripeness & fat with fatness
Bursting on winds my odors,
My ripe figs and rich pomegranates
In infant joy at thy feet
O Urizen, sported and sang;

Then thou with thy lap full of seed
With thy hand full of generous fire
Walked forth from the clouds of morning

On the virgins of springing joy,
 On the human soul to cast
 The seed of eternal science. (9.15-12.34, E 88)

Ahania recalls a time when she and Urizen annihilated selfhood and its attendant jealousy by giving each other (sexually) to others. Whereas “love” (as *agape* or *Caritas*) thematizes the “sympathy” in sympathetic imagination, what Ahania describes is rather different. Her lament draws on the “Song of Songs” to disperse eroticism into language, retaining a grammatical locus of personhood through the repetition of the pronoun “my”: “*My* chambers,” “*my* odors,” and “*my* ripe figs and rich pomegranates.” Ahania could be using metaphors or she could be describing her shape-shifting: her imagery is both the vehicle of her desire and its metamorphic expression. She is at home in tropological language—so much so that “she” disappears into it.

Ahania identifies the milk in her ducts with semen, phallicizing her breasts and echoing (via the echo of “my chambers”) the procreative sexuality of Urizen:

1. my chambers (bedroom) = my chambers (milk ducts)
2. milk in my chambers = eternal seed

“Semen = breast milk” is non-analogical (and “pseudo-metaphorical” in de Man’s sense)—yet it has a place in a mythic “system,” inasmuch as Ahania is identifying masculine and feminine, transcending the division of the

sexes. In *Love and Logic*, Stephen Cox says that “according to Ahanian’s strangely wonderful lament, love was originally, and properly paradoxical,” and characterizes her images as “resisting dualism (or any other fixed logic)” (160). “Paradox” is the metalanguage of love—not the “inside” of love as an experience. What exactly is Ahanian talking about? What is unfallen love?

Love is indexed by linguistic power. It is pointed to by the blurring of metaphor and metamorphosis, catachrestic jumps, and the collapse of mythic fullness into “flat” personification. Ahanian has been called a personification of “*caritas*” or charity (Stempel, 103) and in the last stanza she and Urizen start to flatten as emblems of passive and active contrary: she is the erotic mediation of intellect, and he is the sower of solar fire—echoing Aristotle’s famous “sun-sower” in the *Poetics* (“To scatter seed is called sowing: but action of the sun in scattering his rays is nameless. Still this process bears to the sun the same relation as sowing to the seed” (3.21)). Urizen casts his seed on the “virgins of springing joy”—a catachrestic identification of reason and sexuality that manifests the very eros that it is depicting. The collapse of catachrestic “energy” into uncastrated desire counters a previous scene in *The Book of Ahanian* when Urizen’s son, Fuzon, literally castrates him, having sprung into being as the symptom of Urizen’s repression.

Although one can understand Coleridge's attempt to reason through the inner life of Wordsworth's child in the Great Ode, no one could make this mistake with Ahania. She is not readable as a person, and although readers may well identify with her, her standpoint is primarily formal. It is the standpoint of visionary power figured from the "outside" of visionary power; a vision of "the lineaments of gratified desire," or desire that no longer predicated on lack in language. As we read in *Jerusalem*, a physical embrace has given way, somehow, to metaphorical identifications, embodied as "cominglings": "Embraces are Cominglings from the Head even to the Feet,/And not a pompous High Priest entering by a Secret Place" (69.43-44, E 301).

Whatever we think it means to be "inside" of visionary identification as a form of being, Ahania's lament is an account of it. I revisit such accounts in my next chapter on A.R. Ammons. Like Ahania, Ammons (or his speakers) sometimes narrate from standpoint of self-annihilation; for example, via an apostrophe to the wind spoken from the standpoint of the speaker's dust, or by describing a person as a segment of flux, living, dying, and subducted into metamorphic changes in the earth, reared up in geological formations, and subducted again. Notwithstanding the impossibility of experiencing such a standpoint, it functions as an index of

power; by imagining it, we confront an imagination that is both alien (like nature) and our own. We are struck by the paucity of the thing we call “metaphor,” and confronted by its (repressed) intersection with Being.

Thus Ammons is strangely balanced between Wordsworth and Blake; between a “self conscious” imagination, explored through reflexive figures, and an identification with metaphor as a form of being that is oddly natural or physical. Ammons says, for example, that his poem *Garbage* is “about the pre-Socratic idea of the/ dispositional axis from stone to wind” (20)—but it also *is* that axis, or event; figurality is a “motion” that burns off heavy language and dead systems, emerging into energetic lightness. Like Blake’s Ahania, Ammons takes love—at the limit—to be a self-annihilating eros.

CHAPTER 4

THE VIEWLESS WINDS OF A.R. AMMONS

1. Reflection vs. Self-Reference

A.R. Ammons' poetry expresses an impulse to identify with the void of being, or what Richard Howard has called "the great soft whoosh of Being" (34). Bloom also notes (and complains) about the pull of the void as what is "deepest and most self-destructive in Ammons" (10) and to "most of our central poetic imaginations in America" (10). For Bloom, this impulse to unity with the nothingness of being is an abstract and spooky Transcendentalism—a "bad" Emersonianism. The death-drive in Ammons would be refuted by his own imagination, whose simultaneous assertion of difference and indifference checks a mystical absorption of self into "unity."

The trouble is that Ammons implicates metaphorical imagination in the void. Imagination touches—and swerves away from the void, thereby acquiring negative knowledge. Poetry is the vehicle of this recuperation, as Ammons notes in "A Poem is a Walk":

Poetry is a verbal means to a non-verbal source. It is a motion to no-motion, to the still point of contemplation and deep realization. Its knowledges are all negative and, therefore, more positive than any knowledge. (20)

Poetry brings the mind to a "no-motion" that hovers close to—or is perhaps identical to—the nothingness of being: it is a converter of the non-verbal

into the sayable of the poem; albeit, a sayable about which “nothing can be said.” In response, Bloom says that “‘Corsons Inlet,’ ‘Salience,’ and nearly a hundred other poems by Ammons are nothing of the kind, his imagination be thanked” (14). In the turn of Ammons to description of nature, Bloom finds that Ammons—like Wordsworth and Thoreau—“attempts to summon outward continuities to shield the poet from his mind’s own force” (14).

This reflexive figure (“the mind’s own force”) ties Ammons to Hartman’s Wordsworth, defending against imagination’s capacity for disruptive self-inauguration by binding it in relation to nature—in contrast to Blake. For Ammons, poetic agency is logically indistinguishable from the nothingness of being. Both transcend “an antithesis that logic can’t bridge,” with the reverse implication that poetry’s intersection with the void disrupts rational thought and experience. The “non-verbal” is a source of renewal: “having once experienced the mystery, plentitude, contradiction, and composure of a work of art, we afterward have a built-in resistance to the slogans and progaganda of oversimplification that have often contributed to the destruction of human life” (20).

Ammons often tropes the mind as a mirror of Nature and vice versa; Natural process molds the “motions” of imagination, and the rhetoric of his

poetry. The poem “Reflective,” from the 1966 volume *Northfield Poems*, strips reflection down to a minimal figure:

I found a
weed
that had a

mirror in it
and that
mirror

looked in at
a mirror
in

me that
had a
weed in it (5)

The speaker finds his desire reflecting back to him in the “other’s” mirror, and vice versa. These are narcissistic misrecognitions, but that is not the feeling of the poem. The misrecognitions are necessary, and even cosmically so. Reality is folding on itself to disrupt a self-identity that Ammons will otherwise figure as flux and becoming.

Such Romantic tropes of reflection (mirror lakes, the “speaking face of earth and heaven,” etc) ground the possibility of address according to Paul de Man in “Wordsworth and the Victorians,” and the fiction of a text “addressing” a reader (90). Reflection represses an inaugural violence of

language, or transmutes its symptom in the case of “Reflective,” which exposes a mirror-abyss:

and that
mirror

looked in at
a mirror
in

me... (5)

A mirror looking at a mirror produces a self-referential regress...

1. A reflection reflected.
2. The reflection of that reflection reflected.
3. ...and so on.

Instead of reflecting its power comprehensibly, imagination opens an abyss.

Without this abyss the poem falls flat (try replacing the line “and that mirror” with “and that *weed*”).

The scene of reflection recalls Blake’s Elohim and the Leech Gatherer, who stumble on self-reference as an obstacle to narcissistic reflection. In these scenes (considered in the first chapter of this study), sympathetic imagination does not reflect its power back to the subject as a narcissistic image; for example, as the power to humanize Nature or read the uncanny “other” as an emblem. Rather, power refers to itself as a hole in cognition.

2. Process and Paradox

Ammons is a master of positive process rhetoric, affecting a seemingly spontaneous poetic voice that veers and qualifies, “moment to moment.” Process rhetoric presumes a process-doctrine. Along these lines, Nature’s motions mold and constrain the “motion” of metaphor, rhythm and rhyme in his poetry. With Ammons’ essay “A Poem is a Walk” in mind, Roger Gilbert has convincingly shown how the physicality and temporality of a walk molds rhetoric in two poems, “Corsons Inlet” and “Salience,” noting that the latter “*incorporates* motion or mobility” through the shifting perspectives of the speaker on the same location observed in Nature (268). In this way, external reality checks discursive solipsism or autonomy of imagination. However, the distinction between impressions *on* the mind, and impressions *of* the mind, already eroding in the double-sense of “impression,” collapses when the observed particulars of Nature—wind and water especially—are recurring tropes of process rather than naively observed particulars. It is through such tropes that process points to itself as a rupture in logic and cognition.

In “Corsons Inlet,” a well-known early poem, Ammons observes the Darwinian struggle on a tidal mudflat, rejecting an impulse to rationalize it with an “overall” idea (such as God). Instead, the speaker keeps the

“motions” of his thought open to the dartings, dyings and temporary victories of creatures on the mudflat:

the moon was full last night: today, low tide was low:

black shoals of mussels exposed to the risk
of air
and, earlier of sun,
waved in and out with the waterline, waterline inexact,
caught always in the event of change: (6-7)

“Low tide was low” reminds us of a cause and effect relation between moon and tide--made sinister with its danger to the mussels. “Air” and “sun” make us stop, and consider them threats as well, but risk becomes incalculable with the position of the waterline. The determining factors in its “waving” are impossible to enumerate: they amount to change itself, and suggest to Ammons the incomprehensibility of God. Moreover, “the event of change,” as the dynamism of Darwinian Nature, will emerge as a kind of freedom in which “terror pervades but is unarranged.”

The above passage is arranged, however. The waterline had been waving in the mind of Ammons long before he saw it on the seashore. Ammons had already plugged the waterline into his doctrine as a literalized figure of process, and tells the most concise version of this story in this interview with David Lehman in *The Paris Review*, describing a revelation that he experienced while in the Navy during World War II:

One day, when I was nineteen, I was sitting on the bow of the ship anchored in a bay in the South Pacific. As I looked at the land, heard the roosters crowing, saw the thatched huts, etcetera, I thought down to the water level and then to the immediately changed and strange world below the waterline. But it was the line inscribed across the variable landmass, determining where people would or would not live, where palm trees would or could not grow, that hypnotized me. The whole world changed as a result of an interior illumination—the water level was not what it was because of a single command by a higher power but because of an average result of a host of actions—runoff, wind currents, melting glaciers. I began to apprehend things in the dynamics of themselves—motions and bodies—the full account of how we came to be a mystery with still plenty of room for religion, though, in my case, a religion of what we don't yet know rather than what we are certain of. I was de-denominated. (Ammons)

The waterline emerges here as a rational epiphany--a displacement of God into the incomprehensible complexity of physical dynamics. It seems deceptive however to read “dynamics” in a quasi-mathematical sense of “complexity” or deterministic “chaos” (though at times, Ammons seems to invoke it). In the above passage and elsewhere, Ammons implies a God more radically implicated in uncertainty—and an uncertainty more radical than incomplete knowledge about the initial conditions of a billiard-ball cosmos. What then is “dynamics” or “process” for Ammons?

The waterline is a literalized figure of process that reconciles and exposes paradoxes of change. The mussels—

waved in and out with the waterline, waterline inexact,
caught always in the event of change: (6-7)

“...caught *always*” catches change in a gerund-like sense, spatializing it as Einstein did space-time, or as V.O. Quine froze the Heraclitan river, proving that you *can* step in it twice (245). In *Garbage*, Ammons will invoke space-time to describe university departments as segments of flow:

...departments grow haired and blackhaired
and shade away into white and dome-shine *at the top*:

the dissolve moves through tenure, or a job elsewhere,
part-time, retirement, death: there never is

a department really but a slow flow you can't step
in twice: (42)

The poetry reflects the flow it is talking about by sliding the meaning of “dome-shine” from top of the head to top of the department, and dissolving the department into absences and departures that characterize it as change, rather than people or a static institution. However, this spatialized “flow” that you *can* step in twice (as “the department”) is also a “slow flow you *can't* step/in twice” at the level of human experience. This disjunction between the meta-standpoint of process and that of human experience “caught always in the event of change” is the tension of “Corsons Inlet,” and Ammons’s most realized long poem, *Garbage*. As the above analysis suggests, it is a logical and traumatic tension between two different orders of being.

The waving mussels are helpful here, as an image of motion that exceeds reason. When mathematics formalizes process, it does so by repressing figurality, albeit transferring the latter's symptoms to foundational or technical questions and thereby returning it in negative form. This dynamic is relevant to Ammons. The mussels "waved in and out with the waterline, waterline inexact," although "in and out" are exact terms; "inexact" describes a fuzziness of spatial position rather than actual process (whatever that may be), but "in" and "out" are spatially precise. Hints of paradox threaten to freeze the "waving" mussels. The figure of "waving" thereby points to itself as an impossibility of motion, even while troping it.

For Ammons, at age 19, the waterline apparently suggested "*things in the dynamics of themselves*." This is what Ammons tries to grasp, staring out at a darkened mudflat as a creature who is both part of--and outside of--Darwinian dynamism, and its economy of life-energy:

a young mottled gull stood free on the shoals
and ate
to vomiting: another gull, squawking possession cracked a crab,
picked out the entrails, swallowed the soft-shelled legs, a ruddy
turnstone running in to snatch leftover bits:

risk is full: every living thing in
siege: the demand is life, to keep life: the small
white blacklegged egret, how beautiful, quietly stalks and spears
the shallows, darts to shore
to stab--what? I couldn't
see against the black mudflats--a frightened

fiddler crab? (7)

Confronted by a darkened mill of life-energy the speaker squints at one of its manifestations—a frightened crab perhaps. “The demand is life, to keep life”—life keeps *itself* bound in forms at the expense of other forms, and the self-reference produces a split between—

1. Cycles of energy into and out of form...
2. Beings tied to form and condemned to die.

The “slow quiet turning” of energy is birth and death, but for a being tied to its own birth and death, this identity is a hole in logic and a trauma (a *trouma* in Lacan’s formulation). The speaker’s identification with the fiddler crab is not creature-to-creature (the crab might not even exist), but trauma-to-trauma. There is a disconnect between what Ammons calls “the larger view” of energy exchange, and the standpoint of a helpless creature condemned by it—a disconnect that informs every line of the poem.

When a predator kills and eats its prey, we should take it in “the larger view” as an exchange of energy, and might even take energy in a spiritual sense. However, the “soft shelled legs” are both the egret’s food and the limbs of a dismembered being—an identification *forced* on us by the currents of energy. This negative identity impinges in the speaker’s shifts from admiration of the egret’s motions (“how beautiful”) to anxiety, and in shifts from present tense (“to stab—what?”), to past tense (“I

couldn't/see...") and back to present ("a frightened/fiddler crab?"). As these shifts suggest, "Corsons Inlet" never quite reconciles Being-as-change with beings "caught always in the event of change." Energy passes in and out of form, but it is indifferent to the terror of life-forms, condemned to pass away. Although Ammons elsewhere softens this indifference with an appeal to Eastern spirituality, the problem remains one of a perspective "inside" of energy, and one that is "outside"—and the short circuit that collapses them, when energies of an apocalyptic metaphorical identification become energies of nature (at the moment of the subject's death).

"Process" implies a distinction between two temporalities: the meta-time of cycling energy (process), and the linear time of living things "*caught*" in mutability and change, rather than *identified* with it. Ammons brings the two levels together in the following passage from "Corsons Inlet":

pulsations of order
in the bellies of minnows: orders swallowed,
broken down, transferred through membranes
to strengthen larger orders: but in the large view, no
lines or changeless shapes: (8)

The time of creative-destruction is unavailable to the minnow, but in the minnow's belly, creative-destruction emanates its meta-time: the time of chemical bonds breaking down, their energy "transferred through

membranes,” and presumably re-released when another creature swallows the minnow:

orders swallowed,

broken down, transferred through membranes
to strengthen larger orders: (8)

“The demand is life, to keep life”—*life eats itself to keep life*—a self-referential conceit that splits the “unity” of being and inaugurates the linear time of Darwinian struggle. The split is between...

1. –cycles of energy (“the large view”) and “every living thing in/siege...”
2. –the spinning of ur-being, and transient beings, sacrificed to its motion...

...which Ammons accepts as a foundational trauma—but tries (provisionally) to heal. When these split levels collapse however, logical problems result: the “large view” of “no lines or changeless shapes” is co-present with the static view of demarcations. Life becomes death (and vice versa). For Ammons, this collapse is “negative knowledge.” It is the scene of Ammons (or his surrogate), staring out at the mudflats and trying to reconcile the eternity of creative destruction with the finite orders it precipitates and destroys.

The close of “Salience” (*Northfield Poems*) offers a provisional reconciliation:

where not a single single thing endures,
 the overall reassures,
 deaths and flights,
 shifts and sudden assaults claiming
 limited orders,
 the separate particles:
 earth brings to grief
 much in an hour that sang, leaped, swirled,
 yet keeps a round
 quiet turning,
 beyond loss or gain,
 beyond concern for the separate reach (20)

“...much in an hour that sang, leaped, swirled” has a Herrick-like music. In a traditional treatment of mutability, it is heaven rather than earth that is “beyond loss or gain,” but in the above passage, energy cycles in and out of form, beyond those creatures tied to “limited orders”: “deaths and flights,/shifts and sudden assaults...” Thus, “not a single single” thing endures, but a non-single thing does: “the overall reassures” as a vertical axis: the emanated time of creative-destruction or “process.”

With the aloofness of a “round/quiet turning” Ammons transmutes religious figures that traditionally put the timeless-in-time. In particular, Ammons transmutes the logos in time (Christ) and Romantic versions of its vertical axis, such as the Blakean “Moment” of inspiration:

- “Eternity is in love with the productions of time”
- “The Ruins of Time build Mansions in Eternity”

The latter of these two quotes draws from John 14:2 “In my father’s house are many mansions...” and it bears on the poem “Mansion” by Ammons.

The Ammons mansion is not in eternity, however, but in the earth’s “round/quiet turning.” What recuperates mutability is not love, nor what Blake called “the Poet’s Work”—though Ammons does, elsewhere, invoke a more limited version of the artist’s capacity to recuperate the loss implicit in flux. Instead, we have more ambiguous reasons to be reassured by the “overall”: it does not arrange its terrors.

3. Short-Circuit

In his first book *Ommateum*, Ammons presents the standpoint of a speaker who is dead, yet hearing things:

The next morning I was dead
 excepting a few peripheral cells
 and the buzzards
 waiting for a savoring age to come
 sat over me in mournful conversations
 that sounded excellent to my eternal ear (44)

The speaker’s “eternal ear” puts eternity into a linear moment of time insofar as the “hearing” is a form of personification, transmuting the buzzard-sounds into conversation. This suggests a visionary-metaphorical temporality; however, the passage is in narrative time. Narrative time is substituting for visionary time or the time of figurality--or maybe the speaker is dead. It is impossible to distinguish tropological identity from the speaker’s logical and

literal identity with his corpse, and this equivocation, is exploited by Ammons in his well-known poem “Mansion.”

Put otherwise, the energy of a metaphorical identification is becoming identified with physical, or at least metaphysical energy. Imagination, merging with “knowledge” of negative being, annihilates the subject. We should distinguish this kind of visionary power from a Blakean vision that concedes the loss of an “outside” reality—but only through the gain of a reality that is “outside-in” or humanized. In a Blakean visionary mode, for example, unfallen metaphor is a form of thought and desire that survives the abstract distinction between body and soul. Above however, the situation is different. This speaker experiences the “neither-nor/both-and” “logic” of metaphorical identity as an equivocation between life and death. We might be reminded of the Leech Gatherer and Cumberland Beggar (with the *caveat* that Wordsworth kept their inner lives opaque), although the more accurate formal precedent is Christina Rossetti’s speaker in “After Death,” assuming the standpoint of her own corpse, or Emily Dickinson’s use of the device. These gothic echoes are detectable in the poems of Ammons, where absences tend to hang around as presences, or names still refer to the dead—or the remains of the dead have a point of view. I will examine these scenes,

although it suffices to say here that they are obsessive, and in them, humanity bears the “logic” of figurality as a spectral state.

Ammons invokes standpoints in which the speaker is and is not assimilated to his physical remains, remaining an “I” after death. For Ammons, we are our physical bodies, and there is no resurrection, although literal identity with the motion of reality seems to have spiritual implications. Inasmuch as tropological identity with the dust is threatening to collapse into literal identity, it is the “mystical” death-drive that Bloom and Howard note. Identity with dust is the univocity of the “One” or the void: “knowledge” about which nothing can be said or remembered. Nothing can be said about the void, but the poet can speak from inside of metaphorical identity—or invent a speaker who does. At the apocalyptic limit, metaphoricity is close enough to death that a speaker, speaking from beyond the grave, is also speaking from inside of metaphor, and vice-versa. In the well-known poem “Mansion” therefore, the speaker *reports* a visionary identification with dust as though it were literal. In his long-poem *Garbage*, Ammons will describe a movement from living language to dead metaphor, or from tropological to logical identity—and vice versa. In this movement however, there is necessarily a peculiar moment when

metaphorical and literal meaning collapse: when language passes through the void, as it “recycles” meaning.

4. “Mansion”

By positing the entity addressed, visionary apostrophe is a closed circuit. Poetry—as inner voice—is even more radically self-inaugurating. Such self-reference is a privileged signature of constitutive power, and a figure of its autism, cut off from the world and focused on its self-realization. In the best case, the poet identifies with power in a way that brings the reader along with her, and in the worst case (when the apostrophe does not work) she leaves the reader—and perhaps herself—with the inscrutability of a private fantasy and the dead convention of the vocative. In neither case however, does the poetic voice have the time to dramatize its self-realization—or analyze it in the way that the rhetor and the critic do. By reporting her apostrophe rather than speaking it in the lyric present within the frame of the poem, the speaker buys distance and time, speaking from inside of the identification that ostensibly grounds it. She makes that identification the subject of a poem.

“Mansion”—an early poem by A.R. Ammons from *Expressions at Sea Level*—is an example of a mentioned or reported address:

So it came time
for me to cede myself

and I chose
 the wind
 to be delivered to

The wind was glad
 and said it needed all
 the body
 it could get
 to show its motions with

and wanted to know
 willingly as I hoped it would
 if it could do
 something in return
 to show its gratitude

When the trees of my bones
 rises from the skin I said
 come and whirlwinding
 stroll my dust
 around the plain

so I can see
 how the ocotillo does
 and how the saguaro-wren is
 and when you fall
 with evening

fall with me here
 where we can watch
 the closing up of day
 and think how morning breaks (41)

The speaker reports his dialog with the wind, and then quotes his address to the wind in the last two stanzas (minus quotation marks)—a heightened effect, akin to direct address, but still distanced from it. The distance keeps poet and reader outside of a *tropological* identification with wind and dust,

but thereby allows the speaker to *narrate* as if from inside of that identification. Thus, by citing a dialog with the wind, the poet puts speaker and reader both inside and outside of an identification.

The speaker reconciles himself to death through metaphorical identification, and the time of his death is the time of this identification (“So it came time for me/To cede myself”) passed along through a series of infinitives:

- to cede myself
- to be delivered to
- to show its motions with
- to show its gratitude

Each of these infinitives marks a “plot point” in the speaker’s dialog with nature. However, they index something unassimilable to narrative through their repetition; an identification that occurs in apostrophic rather than narrative time. The last two stanzas narrate the standpoint of this identification as the standpoint of the poet’s dust, falling with evening into the place where he stands here and now. In particular, he will trade corporeal sensation for figural modes of being.

In the deal that the speaker would make with the wind, he cedes his selfhood, becoming self and other: he would pass into dust, but retain something of his present corporeal standpoint, watching the “closing up of day.” This is tropologic, and it is also to tropologic that the speaker cedes

himself by ceding himself to nature: paradox is the index of nature's power and metaphorical contradiction alike—both partake in the void. Question: when is a man home and not home? Answer: when he is dead. The “mansion” of the dust is a paradox from the outside, but from the inside, the paradox might be reconciled—a term that Ammons uses via Coleridge.

Inside of nature—inside of its most basal energies—we are home and not home. It is not just that the speaker identifies himself with matter and motion—he reconciles the paradoxical “logic” of that identification (that he is, and is not himself), by giving himself a voice. We might call such tropes “second-order” metaphors: accounts from the *outside* of what it feels like to experience metaphor from the *inside* as a form of thought and desire.

Ammons invokes this sort of figure in his long poem, “Summer Place,” from one of his later volumes, *Brink Road*:

our beauty, our beauty, on what shoal or shelf, ledge
or cloud will it lie down, dwelling beyond rust and moth,
so beyond it will know the worm and have no cognizance
thereof.... (226-227)

To “know the worm and have no cognizance thereof” is to know death and not to know that we know it. This is not metaphor, but the “logic” of metaphor, troped as “negative knowledge”—a “second order” metaphor.

In the above passage, as in “Mansion,” the “inside” of metaphor is the standpoint of death. It is not just that metaphor recuperates death, there is

also something of death in metaphorical agency. In his most overtly transcendentalist mode, Ammons claims, in *Garbage*, that there is an “indifference of all the differences” (27) penetrating every moment of flux, even attending casual slaughters and excrement in its “storms of generosity” (as he puts it in his poem “City Limits,” from *Briefings* (105)). What would it be to know this informing spirit of flux? In a famous passage from *Nature*, Ralph Waldo Emerson claimed to have experienced it:

Standing on the bare ground,--my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,--all mean egoism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the universal being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. (6)

Emerson’s eyeball collapses seer into seeing by making the former transparent. The eyeball thereby figures metaphorical identity as the immersion of seer and seen into “currents of the universal being.” Currents of the universal being are electrical currents whose polarities might be thought to hold opposites in tension; ergo, to identify with those currents is to experience a reconciliation of opposites—seer and seen—as an impersonal form of vision.

Emerson’s sentence “I am part or particle of God” retains the personal pronoun “I,” and Ammons seizes on a similar paradox: for Ammons, subject pronouns resist physical annihilation. He most outrageously asserts this

tension in his long poem *Garbage*, where the name of a person still refers to the person after his death—his body dissolved and subducted into the geological record (38). In “Mansion” also, the speaker accepts the annihilation of corporeal sight, but remains an “I” who retains a form of sight through his identity with dust and motion:

so I can see
 how the ocotillo does
 and how saguaro-wren is
 and when you fall
 with evening

fall with me here (41)

M.H. Abrams has noted that these lines echo the casual greeting “How are you doing” and “how are you?” However, the speaker is not saying “how do you do” but *seeing* “how the ocotillo does...”--seeing-as-saying. “Seeing” is the faculty of an “I,” but also impersonal. The shift to class name (“saguaro-wren”) from the definite article (“*the* ocotillo”) emphasizes this universality by collapsing individuals into universals, as though the speaker were interacting with concrete universals or those patterns of permanence in flux that Goethe called *Dauer im Wechsel*. The last line of the poem substitutes “think” where we would expect “see,” yielding the formulation: “and think how morning breaks.” Thus, the speaker is not just contemplating the sunrise, but thinking-as-seeing the sunrise from the standpoint of the

dust--thinking nature from the inside, as though the wind were currents of thought, falling with evening to a death-like still-point.

Elsewhere, Ammons invokes this non-verbal still-point from which an ideal reader would contemplate the “motions” of a poem:

...but why is it of use

to be brought through organized motion from chaos and
ephemerality to no-motion: to touch the knowledge that
motions are instances of order and direction occurring
briefly in the stillness that surrounds: to touch, to know,
to be measured and criticized by the silence, to acknowledge
and surrender to wholeness and composure: the non-verbal

energy at that moment released, transformed back through the
verbal, the sayable poem: spirit-being, great one in the world
beyond sense, how do you fare and how may we fare to Thee:
(40-41)

As in “Mansion,” infinitives pass along the force of an identification with
the void...

- to be brought
- to touch
- to touch, to know
- to be measured and criticized
- to acknowledge and surrender

At the moment of “surrender,” the “non-verbal/energy” of the void is
“transformed back through the/verbal the sayable poem.” Ammons enacts
this release of “non-verbal energy” by transforming it through apostrophe,
and names this energy “spirit-being”:

“..spirit-being, great one in the world/beyond sense, how do you fare and how may we fare to Thee:” (41). This apostrophe releases “the non-verbal/energy” of identification into the temporality of dialog. “How do you fare and how may we fare to Thee?” recalls the greeting-form “how do you do,” noted by M.H. Abrams in “Mansion”—it tropes a subject-subject relation (Abrams). The use of “may” in “how may we fare to Thee” suggests that the Spirit-being may not care how we fare. Who or what is this power? The apostrophe is self-referential. “Spirit” personifies the apostrophe’s motivating power: the turn of apostrophe is the thing turned to.

Apostrophe faces its own identification with the “other” as “other,” reminding us that metaphorical identity is negative. The reader, and by extension, the poet, touch the formlessness of non-being--and “in that moment,” transmute its “energy” back into “the sayable.” This “surrender” to “non-verbal/energy” recalls the speaker of “Mansion,” surrendering his dust to the invisible wind--albeit swerving from death through that very identification. Making the non-verbal sayable is like making the invisible wind visible, which the speaker of “Mansion” does by sacrificing his dust (“The wind was glad and said it needed all the body it could get to show its motions with”). The speaker’s injunction to the wind--“Stroll my dust/around the plain”--assimilates the wind’s “stroll” to the visionary

swagger of Ammons, and recalls the latter's comparison of a poem to a walk. Through this comparison, Ammons states that a poem has the "body" and "physiology" of organic form, but a poem, like the invisible wind, acquires its body through a sacrifice.

In "Mansion," the wind gets its body from the poet's sacrificed body, and by implication, the motions of a poem likewise manifest themselves when a poet or reader sacrifice something of themselves to the nothingness of existence, or the no-motion that penetrates motion at every instant. Even as the speaker of "Mansion" imagines falling with the evening wind to think how morning breaks, we have seen that Ammons elsewhere describes the mind sinking to non-verbal contemplation that brackets stimuli and rational thought. In seeking poetic inspiration, Ammons subjects himself to a controlled privation through a process that he describes in the long poem *Garbage* as akin to sitting "over a great blank." In an analogous passage from *Sphere*, the ideal reader approaches the nothingness of being when reading a poem:

the poem keeps enough revelant variety going to interest

the mind from sleep but enough focus to disinterest it in
external matters: a hypnotic focus, then, that is awakening,
a focus of controlled fullness, not over-exclusiveness: but

the purpose of the motion of a poem is to bring the focused,

awakened mind to no-motion, to a still contemplation of the whole motion, all the motions, of the poem... (40)

As an unedited typographical mistake, “revelant,” functions as a portmanteau word combining “revel-atory” and “event”—a mistake-turned-figure. The motion of a poem emerges from a substrate of such events which the mind approaches through “a descent into the subconscious/(tentacles maybe into the unconscious).” The mind would remain conscious, yet “descend” by bracketing reason and sensation:

...it permits itself to sink,
to be lowered down the ladder of structured motions... (40)

Even as a poem shows its motions to a reader who cedes himself, the wind shows its motions in the poem “Mansion,” when the speaker cedes his dust to it:

...it needed all
the body it could get
to show its motions with (41)

“Motion” here is the motion of figures and the sound of a poem—a figural motion that even figures its own motion—“the motion of its motion.”

However, Ammons implies that poetic imagination requires a sacrifice or privation—a body to show its motions with. It is only through this sacrifice that imagination recuperates the formlessness of being.

“The shapes nearest shapelessness awe us the most” (16) according to Ammons in “*Sphere*,” sounding like Edmund Burke on the sublime. For Ammons, the wind’s shapelessness is its potential to take on forms, and its invisibility is an imageless image of the Romantic imagination. The most significant component of imagination is its formlessness, which Ammons takes to be non-verbal. Imagination is like an iceberg whose cognitive dimension is on the surface. To identify with the depths—even minimally—is surrendering something to the void.

5. Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Ammons: Viewless Winds

In *Measure for Measure* the Duke advises the condemned Claudio to “Be absolute for death”:

...Thou art not thyself;
For thou exist’st on many a thousand grains
That issue out of dust... (3.1.19-21)

Claudio does not listen. Instead he clings to life, fearfully imagining death in the more famous lines that follow:

To be imprison’d in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendant world... (3.1.125-7)

The Duke tells Claudio that life is other to the dust that it “exist’st on,” but Claudio likewise imagines that in death he will be—and will not be—identical to his own dust, and therefore swept in violent and perpetual

motion while remaining an “I.” Claudio’s nightmare is what Ammons recuperates in “Mansion.”

The peculiarity in both the nightmare of Claudio and the fantasy of Ammons is that they retain the standpoint of an “I” after death. Richard Howard notes that Ammons would “suffer or search out immersion in the stream of reality without surrendering all that is and makes one particularly oneself” (34). What Ammons retains after death is an American ego. The after-death conceit echoes differently in English tradition, assuming a Gothic cast. We might recall Christina Georgina Rossetti’s speaker in “After Death,” assuming the standpoint of her own corpse:

The curtains were half drawn, the floor was swept
And strewn with rushes, rosemary and may
Lay thick upon the bed on which I lay,
Where through the lattice ivy shadows crept.
He leaned above me, thinking that I slept
And could not hear him; but I heard him say... (33)

When inverted as a spectral state, the “logic” of a figure insists as pathos and loss insist (Blake’s Urthona *necessarily* becomes Los (loss) at the moment this inversion occurs). By the time we reach the conclusion of Rossetti’s poem—

He did not touch the shroud, or raise the fold
That hid my face, or take my hand in his,
Or ruffle the smooth pillows for my head:
He did not love me living; but once dead
He pitied me; and very sweet it is

To know he still is warm though I am cold. (34)

—the equivocations of life and death, passion and loss are formally *affective*; i.e., their logical pathology is their pathos.

In the poetry of Ammons, we might imagine that such equivocations of life and death resolve into univocal death when the speaker learns how to assume his dust in silence and no longer insist on an “I.” The result, according to Howard, is:

...a region, a Death, to speak literally, where there is no poetry, no speech to one’s kind, no correspondence perceived and maintained, but only the great soft whoosh of Being that has obsessed our literature from its classical figures, as Lawrence saw so clearly, down to Roethke, Wright Morris, Thornton Wilder. (34)

What do these fantasies have to do with imagination? Not much, if we conceive imagination as a present form of thought, desire and being; however, imagination, for both Ammons and Wordsworth, has a negative, disruptive or incomprehensible aspect. Early readers of Wordsworth caught an echo of Claudio’s rumination on “viewless winds” in a famous passage of the *Prelude* that bears on “Mansion” by A.R. Ammons:

Visionary power
Attends the motions of the viewless winds,
Embodied in the mystery of words:
There, darkness makes abode, and all the host
Of shadowy things work endless changes,--there,
As in a mansion like their proper home,
Even forms and substances are circumfused

By that transparent veil with light divine,
 And, through the turning intricate of verse,
 Present themselves as objects recognised,
 In flashes, and with glory not their own.
 (1850 5.595-605 W 205)

Wordsworth's repetition of "mansion" echoes in Ammons, along with the sense—via Claudio's nightmare—that to identity with imagination is to cede our dust to the wind (although the dust in turn makes the wind visible, in the case of Ammons, who attempts a reconciliation). In a rolling motion of deferral, the above lines displace the agency of visionary power, and through "the turnings intricate of verse" its effulgence ends up circumfusing Wordsworth's own language. In trying to locate a stable definition of visionary power in this poetry, the reader might sense that the point is rather to subject visionary power to its own operations, "circumfusing" it with its own transparent veil, so that it emerges with a glory not its own. In the movement of these lines, power fails to grasp itself, maintaining its alterity as "the great Nature that exists in works/Of mighty Poets" (594-95).

These lines also echo the movement of "Lucy" in "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal":

A slumber did my spirit seal;
 I had no human fears:
 She seemed a thing that could not feel
 The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force:

She neither hears nor sees:
 Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,
 With rocks, and stones, and trees. (LB 246)

The dead girl is trapped in a motion that unsettles her identity with Nature—
 returning the disquieting implications of Claudio's nightmare. With these
 implications in mind, Cynthia Chase has written:

Identification with natural objects, in an
 evasion of temporality and death, instead
 brings on or constitutes that very death--
 which is not a state of rest but a state of
 constant motion, precisely like the endless
 change and placeless place of words or the
 imagination (76)

Read through the impulse of Ammons to identify with natural objects and
 assume their cyclic motions as a transcendent temporality, this passage
 figures that motion as the “placeless place of words.” To identify with
 natural objects is already a tropological “motion” that appears—when troped
 by the motions of Lucy and Claudio—to be a form of senseless possession.
 Ammons, on the other hand, presents tropes of identity as annihilating, and
 physical annihilation as tropological. The mutual implication of imagination
 and death is what Ammons describes as a void of being, indexed by the
 contradiction implicit in metaphor.

These notions are challenged in other ways by “A Slumber Did My
 Spirit Seal,” which also poses the problem of figurality as a rupture of

narrative temporality. In particular, the instantiation of the girl as nature enters the narrative through the girl's death. In death, the girl seems claimed by nature all along, and never fully realized as a real girl. The subject pronoun that persists after the girl's death as prosopopoeia proleptically haunted her in that same way when she was alive—as if there were already a “thingness” about her: “She seemed a thing that could not feel/The touch of earthly years.” The girl's death—marked by the cut between stanzas—ironizes the speaker's prior feeling that she was beyond the touch of time.¹ However, she was always beyond *narrative* time and irony, inasmuch as she is a semi-personification or a face imposed on nature—imposed by Wordsworth, from beyond the narrative. The time of that figural imposition interferes with narrative temporality because the poem cannot register it. From the standpoint of narrative, “She seemed a thing...” is proleptic of the girl's entry into a thing-world of nature; however, this prolepsis represses a sense in which the pronoun “she” was a prosopopoeia all along. As a semi-personification right from the beginning, the girl is an impossible object for Wordsworth, whose desire enters the poem from a higher narrative level, demanding that the girl die. The poem registers this demand as a trauma,

¹ As de Man read “A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal” in “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” the girl's death is proleptic of the poet's own, as an impossible empirical knowledge beyond irony, where the poet could look back from the standpoint of death at a mystified self (224-25).

and thereby folds on itself to encounter figurality as though it impinged on it from the “outside.”

Prosopopeia in Ammons is similarly negative, and at times, bizarrely so. When Ammons turns to the dead, tropological identification crashes narrative time, disrupting the flow of process:

...how

quaint and sad the lives of those who have lived
but are gone, the vacant sadness of two eternities

pressed together, squeezing them dry to
nondegradable remnants—trash: the meaning,

the tears, loves, sweet handholdings, all
the fears, jealousies, hangings, burnings—

throwaways, obsolescences that plug up
the circulations today... (94)

To take reality as process, everything must be recyclable—nothing is “non-degradable.” In the lines above however, we get a hint of something non-recyclable, or at least nondegradable: the dead who “plug up/the circulations.” We might recall a dead brother, lost by Ammons at age four in an incident that marked him—another was stillborn. As in the Lucy poem, death is a formal discontinuity, signaled in the lines above as a gap between the “two eternities” of before and after. To borrow a favorite calculus-metaphor of Ammons, there are no gaps in the curvature of a flux-

like imagination—no right angles. However, Ammons was equally aware that the self-differing “now” is a paradox of loss. Such paradoxes dog the poet of flux, even as they fascinate the (obsessional) poet of ruin and mutability; they put gaps in linear time, or suspend it through a turn to the dead. From the standpoint of energy-cycles, invoked in “Corsons Inlet,” and now assimilated to movements of imagination, the dead are trash to be recycled—“burdening the living/with guilty obligations of memory,” as Ammons puts it in *Garbage* (94). However, there is also something structurally insistent about the dead, inasmuch as they are special cases of a loss implicit in any self-differing moment of “flux.” Mathematics employs formal defenses against foundational problems of calculus, but the process-poet is exposed to a real of language famously anticipated by Zeno. The obsessional Ammons is *formally obsessional*. He identifies with process, and therefore assumes a self-referential turn through which process points to itself as frozen aporia.

Ammons is a poet of flux dogged by related themes of mutability and death. He invokes a material dwelling-place in “Mansion” and does the same in his long poem *Sphere*: “our skinny house perpetual where in total diminishment we will/last, elemental and irreducible, the matter of the universe”--where “the nervous atom spins and shines unsmirched” (11-12).

This ground-state of matter, figured as the limit of the “fine,” is itself a limit of process (“so must we all approach the fine”) rather than a static destination (76). For Ammons, the problem posed by a rhetoric of process (“everything is a rhetoric”) is the following: “can we make a home of motion?” (76)

When Ammons declares the atom “unsmirched,” we might recall that dust is similarly immune from mutability as a mansion for the dead. Ammons inherits this trope of mutability—but also its problems—from poetic tradition exemplified by the following lines from Shakespeare:

Fear no more the heat o’ the sun;
Nor the furious winter’s rages,
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone, and ta’en thy wages... (4.2, 358-61)

The lines declare an end to suffering—but only by apostrophizing the dead as potential sufferers in the first place. “Golden lads and girls all must,/As chimney-sweepers come to dust,” but the dust retains a standpoint through prosopopoeia, and this standpoint is vulnerable. By conjuring a dead addressee, the speaker raises the possibility that others would also conjure her with ill intent. Thus, Shakespeare’s apostrophe defends against its own conjuring power by incanting to protect the dead:

No exorciser harm thee!
Nor no witchcraft charm thee!
Ghost unlaid forbear thee!

Nothing ill come near thee! (4.2, 376-79)

As a “thee,” the addressee seems not quite consigned to the dust--the “thee” remains vulnerable. The apostrophized dust is both self and other, and by trying to achieve that reconciliation, the apostrophe would reconcile the “logic” of a prosopopoeia, or metaphorical identification that grounds it.

When Ammons turns to the dead, they are unsettled by it, and the effect echoes Gothic tropes of being buried alive—as in these lines from *Sphere*:

....though I am not enjoying the
first day of spring very much, it is not with me as it is
with my friend George, spending his first spring in the grave...
(13)

Ammons digresses from a meditation on flux and formlessness to reference “my friend George...” who is an instance of flux, degenerating into formlessness. Ammons repeats the move in *Garbage*, referring to the ashes of his friend as a “fact,” left alone in the cemetery after the speeches, poetry (and perhaps apostrophes)—“left alone to itself to have its first/night under the stars...” (38)

“First spring in the grave” (*Sphere*) echoes “first night under the stars” (*Garbage*): the “fact” now faces eternity yawning before it, trapped in matter like someone who has moved into a too-small apartment (“our skinny house”), or spends a first spring away from home in a foreign country, never

to return. After the funeral, “the people turn to each other and away,” undoing their turn to the dead. What remains is a logical precipitate of prosopopoeia: the dead not at home in their dust.

Ammons faces the dead as four-dimensional sections of flux. Van Orman Quine claimed that we can step into the same river twice if that river is a process-object; i.e., when we point to objects, we are really pointing to sections of flux or space-time which remain self-identical (246). Ammons seizes on this notion, stating the principle in *Garbage*:

...isness itself is just the name of a segment
of flow: (48)

By extension, *people* are segments of flow--with one *caveat*: somewhere in that flow is the “fact” of death.

In *Garbage*, the speaker turns his attention to that fact in an abrupt digression:

I went up the road
a piece this morning at ten to Pleasant Grove
for the burial of Ted’s ashes: (37)

Ted’s ashes are not Ted, and there are echoes of “Fear no More the Heat o’ the Sun”—it is a hot day:

those above
ground care; those below don’t: the sun was

terribly hot, and the words of poems read out

loud settled down like minnows in a shallows
for the moment of silence and had their gaps

and fractures filled up and healed quiet: into
the posthole went the irises and hand-holds of dirt: (37)

The words do not heal, rather, the moment of silence heals. Then, we get an image of spring thaw, and Ted's ashes leaching away from whatever they were.

This shape-shifting is the non-self-identity of flux — which is what Ted is:

...this one fact put down is put down
forever, is it, or for forever, forever to be a

part of the changes about it, switches in the
earth's magnetic field, asteroid collisions,

tectonic underplays, to be molten and then not
molten, again and again: when does a fact end:

what does one do with this gap from just yesterday
or this morning to fifty-five billion

years to infinity... (38)

As a segment of ongoing flow, "Ted" marks the absence of Ted, and gives him a peculiar sort of presence. Otherwise put: the geomorphic and cosmic flux named "Ted," now spreads out as the "fact" of his absence, graved into

the memory of reality as a non-local trauma: a non-degradable gap between before and after.

Elsewhere in Ammons, we will find this graving interrupting process—as in these lines from *Sphere*:

(the poem reaches a stillness

which is its form): crush a bug and the universe goes hollow
with hereafter: in the cemeteries a shiver settles: sparrows
played down to speech in the cedar bunch into flowers:

across the valley a one-sided rim rises, highways like
caterpillars climb to the biting edge: the wings of red-ant
queens clamp flat macadam pools, the queens free-climbing

mirrored trees... (46)

The dead bug rolls out “herafter” as a spatialized record of loss, frozen like the waving mussel in “Corsons Inlet.” When spatialized, process is a graveyard that you *can* step in twice (which is why it grounds Quine’s theory of logical identity): the universe registers the loss of the bug, and so does the poem—the latter through a visionary catalog of particulars whose caterpillars and red-ant queens pin “the event of change” in the collector’s display case. Why does Ammons connect the still-point of the poem with the death of the bug in the lines above? The stillpoint is where poet and reader touch the nonverbal void—but recuperate it through the “unity” of the poem; i.e., the unity that pulls together the catalog of images in this passage above.

We might be reminded here of Eliot's "still point of a turning world"—the stillpoint in flux that Ammons would recuperate as an eternal axis of imagination. For Ammons however, the stillpoint of imagination is a gap from the standpoint of linear time—a rupture between before and after that looks, from the outside at least, like death.

At the conclusion of the funeral scene in *Garbage*, the mourners break up, and Ammons finally gives Ted a standpoint, abstracted now as a "fact":

...the shallows drift away,

the people turn to each other and away: motors
start and the driveways clear, and the single

fact is left alone to itself to have its first
night under the stars but to be there now

for every star that comes: (39)

The cosmos purifies the standpoint of Ted with an austerity worthy of Christina Rossetti. All that is left of him is a bare standpoint that bears witness to "hereafter."

Why does Ammons put the world in motion as a "poet of process"? Is it that he would find his brother there, assimilated to the "slow quiet turning" of energy, beyond mutability? Or is it the contrary: with everything else in motion, it is only through non-degradable grief—the assertion of love as non-degradable and permanent grief (materially registered by the universe

itself)—that Ammons would find respite from motion? In his obsessional mode, Ammons imagines death as a gap between everything that comes before and everything after—an interruption of process. However, such gaps are also integral to the self-differing of the “now,” and the place where continuous change tries—and fails—to grasp itself as discrete change. The danger of the obsessional mode is that it would pull us back into the safety of the void, which heals such paradoxes through “the resolutions of nothingness.”

6. Paradox and Cyclicity

The cosmic swagger of Ammons owes something to Kerouac’s bop prosody in those moments when the speaker has his hand on the wheel, channeling the flux of reality between pulls on a Styrofoam bucket of coffee. Ammons refers to metaphorical agency with metaphysical names—such as “energy,” “burning” and “dispositional axis.” He thereby tropes metaphoricity as a destructive-creative power of Nature, with a peculiar *caveat*: the use of metaphor is itself an example of “energy,” “burning” and “dispositional axis.” Thus, a metaphorical use of “*burning*” is a literal manifestation of *burning*—burning references itself through an erasure of the quotation marks that mark metaphor. Ammons will speak more directly, at moments of high Romantic pitch, of his own “burning” or claim, in

Garbage, “I am the wind.” More typically (and originally), Ammons stages tropological identity as a slippage and confusion of levels, or an erosion of logic and sense. During long digressions, we are not sure exactly where physical waste ends and linguistic waste begins—what is physical energy and what is linguistic energy. Comparisons established through analogy and simile blur into identity, as when the physical sense of energy turns into something spiritual. For this reason, Ammons’ much discussed invocation of science is rarely straightforward in *Garbage*. Ammons revives the dead metaphor in science, and makes “scientific” the motions of metaphor. Thus he will claim that the “motion” of a poem is impersonal and “scientific”—that he is only daubing its “dispositional axis” with a bit of ink here and there.

In a mythical mode, Ammons depicts imagination stealing its power from the void, its motions minimally swerving from death. Through this motion, the unity of being fractures and grasps itself as other, now implicated in language, loss and materiality. Such motions of imagination are guilt-ridden, and accompanied by an entropic pull back to unity. In “Guide” (another poem from *Expressions of Sea Level*), Ammons warns:

You cannot come to unity and remain material:
in that perception is no perceiver: (26)

“In that perception is no perceiver” recalls the impersonal seeing of Emerson’s eyeball—here troping a mystical identification with spirit, perfection and stasis. However, the safety of the void is the safety of the grave, where a “you” still persists, occupying a cramped mansion that recalls the situation of the dead friends, George and Ted:

you cannot
 turn around in
 the Absolute: there are no entrances or exits
 no precipitations of forms
 to use like tongs against the formless: (26)

“You cannot/turn around in/the Absolute” because there is no tropological turning. To get tropes moving requires an original sin—a symmetry-breaking event that disrupts the stasis of “unity,” at least in this myth of origins, told by the wind:

to be
 you have to stop not-being and break
 off from *is* to *flowing* and
 this is the sin you weep and praise:
 origin is your original sin:
 the return you long for will ease your guilt
 and you will have your longing:

the wind that is my guide said this: it
 should know having
 given up everything to eternal being but
 direction... (26-27)

The wind sacrifices “everything to eternal being,” but in the same moment, breaks away with minimal “direction,” or structure. We recall that in an analogous motion described in *Sphere*, the poet sacrifices to eternal being, and thereby releases its energy into “the sayable poem (41).”

In this pocket-myth, the speaker transmutes a wordless/timeless identification with the wind into dialog, as in “Mansion.” The swap of narrative for figural time gives the poem “tongs against the formless,” to tell a story about what poetry is and where it came from. The wind broke away from stasis and started to move, but thereby precipitated a death-driven longing for stasis--and guilt for having chosen materiality and flux over eternity and perfection. When the speaker tells us that the wind has “given up everything to eternal being but/direction,” he echoes the speaker in “Mansion,” who gave up everything to the wind but the standpoint of his own dust. These sacrifices of body to the wind, and the wind to non-being, pass along the nothingness of “eternal being,” and implicate metaphor in it.

We might imagine that Ammons would identify with the original swerve that precipitated all motion, and that this would be the informing energy of his poetry (its “spirit”). Yet the “energy” of the wind’s originary break is what the swerve of Ammon’s tropes defer with a motion that is neither flux-like or continuous. In his long poems, Ammon’s uses of the

colon mark digressions into paradoxes of mutability, quasi-apostrophic turns to the dead, paens to the mysteries of process, or ironic undercutting. These swerves trouble the story told by the wind, in that they are swerves with nothing to swerve from.

In “Guide” for example, colons break up the verse into units of paradox and tautology. The speaker is trying to recuperate eternal being (“unity and death”) as thought—but he does so by trying to “think” the void from the outside, and his language becomes rigid. He appeals to the wind because it is closest to the void, as an imageless image, near formlessness:

how I said can I be glad and sad: but a man goes
 from one foot to the other:
 wisdom wisdom:
 to be glad and sad at once is also unity
 and death:
 wisdom wisdom (27)

As the speaker’s language hardens and schematizes, the flowing wind departs, and the poem ends: “are these the thoughts you want me to think I said but/the wind was gone and there was no more knowledge then” (27).

The void is “the one of grief and love” as Ammons puts it in *Garbage*, or as the speaker puts it here, the void is “to be glad and sad at once.” The speaker tries to reconcile these paradoxes by oscillating from one pole to another: “but a man goes from one foot to the other.” To move “from one

foot to the other” is to temporalize paradox in the way that a machine, choking on the self-reference of “This sentence is false,” oscillates from “true” to “false” in pursuing a vicious circle. Oscillation is a minimal defense against closure, as are the oscillations of nature—the movement of waveforms, cycles of birth and death--and their narrative analogs, beginnings and endings. The distinction then, is between static paradoxes of self-reference that index the void, and a dynamic cyclicity that “solves” those paradoxes with oscillation.

The “jump” from atemporal “unity” into oscillation figures the origin of natural cycles, but in these lines from Ammons’ *Garbage*, it becomes impossible to separate natural motion from motions of imagination:

tissues and holograms of energy circulate in
us and seek and find representations of themselves

outside us, so that we can participate in
celebrations high and know reaches of feeling

and sight and thought that penetrate (really
penetrate) far, far beyond these our wet cells,

right on up past our stories, the planets, moons,
and other bodies locally to the other end of

the pole where matter’s forms diffuse and
energy loses all means to express itself except

as spirit, there, oh, yes, in the abiding where
mind but nothing else abides, the eternal,

until it turns into another pear or sunfish, (21-22)

The mind, as personified energy, approaches “the other end of the pole,” dissolving into void. What follows is a descent back into matter:

that momentary glint in the fisheye having

been there so long coming and going, it’s
eternity’s glint: it all wraps back round,

into and out of form, palpable and impalpable,
and in one phase, the one of grief and love (22)

“The one of grief and love” echoes “sad and glad at once” from the poem “Guide.” Nature temporalizes “the one” by “coming and going,” stuttering on paradoxical being or expressing it in cycles (“...a man goes/from one foot to the other”). “That momentary glint in the fisheye” is temporal synechdoche—the timeless in time, or eternity flashing through every moment of profane cyclicity. Allen Ginsberg uses the fisheye to similar effect in his poem “The End,” from *Kaddish*:

I am I, old father fisheye who begat the ocean... (259)

Here, as in Ammons, God is a unity of eros and thanatos, roiling in primeval chaos. Ammons is not far from Ginsberg’s eastern sources when he describes this chaos as the void of Lao Tse. With a Romantic turn however, Ammons claims that the void’s capacity to “identify” opposites is also a capacity of Coleridgean imagination.

This notion hardens into doctrine in “A Poem is a Walk,”; an essay that begins with a quote from Lao Tse:

Nothing that can be said in words is worth saying. (38)

Poetry is the exception to this rule according to Ammons, and he makes this claim by quoting a familiar passage from Coleridge’s *Biographia*:

...the imagination--and I think poetry--“reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities.” This suggests to me that description, logic, and hypothesis, reaching toward higher and higher levels of generality, come finally to an antithesis logic can't bridge. But poetry, the imagination, can create a vehicle, at once concrete and universal, one and many, similar and diverse, that is capable of bridging the duality and of bringing us the experience of a "real" world that is also a reconciled, a unified, real world. And this vehicle is the only expression of language, of words, that I know of that contradicts my quotation from Lao-tse, because a poem becomes, like reality, an existence about which nothing can be said in words worth saying. (13)

This passage affirms New Critical notions, via Coleridge, of poetic language as autonomous form, taken here as a form of experience through which we know “a reconciled, a unified, real world” (13). The key to this claim is that both metaphor and the void share a paradoxical signature. From the “outside,” the nothingness of being—like the nothingness of metaphor—looks like contradiction and a violation of the excluded middle. From the “inside,” what Ammons calls “poetry, the imagination” is the “vehicle” of an experience that transcends pathologies of classical logic.

On the face of it, this is a theory of positive imagination; i.e., imagination as the form of an experience antithetical to classical logic—

“Unlike the logical structure, the poem is an existence which can incorporate contradictions, inconsistencies, explanations, and counter-explanations and still remain whole...” (15)—however, there is a big problem with this statement when read against the poetry of Ammons. We have already seen in the poem “Guide” that an “experience” of “wholeness” is no experience at all, inasmuch as it puts us “in the mouth of death.” We might take Ammons to mean that metaphoricity is *analogous* to the nothingness of being—or that metaphoricity is a *reflection* of that nothingness; however, models of “reflection” break down where the negativity of poetic agency is concerned—what is a “mimesis” or “reflection” of nothing? In reading the poetry of Ammons carefully, we will instead find him relentlessly troping a metaphoricity (or metaphorical “thinking”) that achieves a *partial* identification with the void—recuperating *something* of the void. This claim is implicit in the pocket myth of wind and its break from eternal being, and it is the meaning of Ammons’ statement that the motions of a poem bring the mind to “no-motion” or, as he puts it in “A Poem is a Walk,” that “poetry is a verbal means to a non-verbal source. It is a motion to no-motion... (20).

For Ammons, what is called “poetry” or “imagination” partially recuperates

death as its irrational dimension, while remaining tied to death as non-meaning (i.e., logical pathology).

To identify with metaphorical identity is to identify with the void—but but swerve “in the same moment,” releasing the “energy” of non-being into “the sayable of the poem.” We saw this movement in “Mansion” and “Guide,” and we can see it more didactically developed in extended passages of *Sphere* and *Garbage*. Imagination, in the guise of the wind, sacrifices to the void, but transmutes its “energy” into minimally structured motion, troped as “direction” or “vector.” Ammons calls this sacrifice “burning.”

7. Burning

In “A Poem is a Walk,” Ammons writes: “I can’t tell you what a poem is, nor can any other man. The reason I can’t tell you is that the purpose of a poem is to go past telling, to be recognized by burning” (13). The poet precipitates poetry by burning—and the reader reads by burning. “Burning” sacrifices informing energy to the void, but precipitates new form in turn. Ammons has in mind a chemical reaction that releases energy as heat, precipitating a compound. Nuclear fission and fusion also serve as models, or vacuum fluctuations that borrow energy from the void and “in the same moment” return the debt. In extreme versions of the trope, Ammons

would have us identify with burning itself—with the flame of chemical reactions that annihilate our physical bodies, “burning us free” in death and dissolution, as in “Regards Regardless,” a poem that I will read shortly, from a later collection of poetry, *Brink Road*: “freedom freely/enough allowed burns free, burns us free (16).

Among these physical metaphors are scatological versions of the figure, notably in *Garbage*, when Ammons describes the creation of a poem as excretion, with the formulation “shit fire (and save matches)” (43). The implication is that a poem, as a physical byproduct of burning, is no different than any physical byproduct. A poem called *Garbage* is especially aware of this.

“Burning” is the way that a poem goes past telling to become an event. The word “burning” wobbles between figural and literal senses per #1 and #2 below:

1. “Burning” dead language to create new metaphor (figural burning)
2. “Burning” dead matter to create new matter (literal burning)

What makes Ammons difficult to read is his tendency to collapse #1 and #2.

For example, in *Garbage*: “I spent every coin I/had into the good business of my own burning” (82). This is both a physical sacrifice and tropological identification with Nature. Doctrinally, “burning” is a second-order

metaphor that tropes a dynamic oscillation between living and dead form, energy and structure, metaphor and rational abstraction.

Ammons takes the limit points of this oscillation to be center (abstraction) and circumference (energy), recalling a schema of “outward” pointing and “inwardly” figural language (readable as a distinction between a logic that would distinguish between sameness and difference, and a logic of “identity” in which both sides are asserted—described by Hazard Adams in “Synechdoche and Method” (Adams 46)). Ammons more obviously echoes Coleridge’s dynamic theorization of the symbol as an oscillation between centripetal (literal) and centrifugal (associative-figural) poles: “In order to derive pleasure from the occupation of the mind, the principle of unity must always be present, so that in the midst of multitude the centripetal force be never suspended, nor the sense be fatigued by the predominance of the centrifugal force.” (318). These Blakean and Coleridgean dynamisms would replace the static term “symbol” with the dynamism of the “symbolic” (Adams 1-40). Ammons is a strange case, however, in that he also wants us to read “burning” physically. As with the terms “axis of disposition” and “energy,” when the literal and figural senses of “burning” collapse, physical energy points to itself as linguistic; a self-reference integral to the poetry of Ammons, and a striking revision of Romantic

imagination that Harold Bloom took as a “darkness” internal to the poetry of Ammons, akin to a Blakean-spectral blocking agent (10-14).

In particular, “figural” and “literal” become adjectives describing states analogous to...and sliding into...physical states. The pre-Socratic axis of disposition that transmutes “wind to stone” has as its special case, transmutations of linguistic energy (energy states whose vehicle is language):

1. *Figural*: mutating, maximally energetic, light, irrational, in motion, inward-pointing, tending toward formlessness and the nothingness of the void
2. *Literal*: static, minimally energetic, heavy, rational-abstract, outward, tending toward a limit point of dead language that decays into the nothingness of the void

In reading #1 and #2 we will find that they wrap around so that the limit point of the “light” and the “heavy” alike is the void—a claim that Ammons repeatedly makes in *Garbage*. “Burning” is the motion from literal to figural—but the word “burning” is neither literal nor figural. The word “burning” will not burn because it is the point where language consumes and recycles itself.

“Burning” is physical burning, generalizable to burning galaxies, “cellular brushfires” of the body, and the burning of garbage, through which matter passes out of form. However, “burning” is also linguistic process:

...there is a mound,

too, in the poet's mind dead language is hauled
 off to and burned down on, the energy held and
 shaped into new turns and clusters... (20)

“New turns and clusters” are tropological turns and pockets of lyric order in the “flow” of the long poem.

The garbage dump is a literal garbage dump, but it is also dead language, burned down, and recycled into new metaphors and new structures:

here is the gateway to beginning, here the portal
 of renewing change, the birdshit, even, melding
 enrichingly in with debris, a loam for the roots
 of placenta: oh, nature, the man on the edge
 of the cardboard-laced cliff exclaims, that there
 could be a straightaway from the toxic past into
 the fusion-lit reaches of a coming time! our
 sins are so many, here heaped, shapes given to
 false matter, hamburger meat left out (28)

The garbage man wants to find a “straightaway” through the fire burning on the dump—a chance at rebirth. Implicitly, he identifies himself with worn-out language, as the speaker does in the following lines from an early Ammons poem, “I am Ezra”:

as a word too much repeated
 falls out of being

so I Ezra went out into the night
 like a drift of sand
 and splashed among the windy oats
 that clutch the dunes
 of unremembered seas (25-26)

Here, it is as though the wind might fling the speaker into sand drifts, absorbing him into an elemental language of nature. For the man atop the dump, “burning” is an analogous re-absorption; a passage through the void, back into potential form whose special case is forms of language. This recuperation of the void should remind us of...

1. The poet transmuting the non-sayable into the sayable of the poem...
2. The wind, swerving from formlessness into minimally structured direction...
3. Metaphor recuperating the void as language about which nothing can be said...

However, the recycling-myth of the dump is different than these prior schemas, inasmuch as imagination no longer grasps itself through paradoxes of loss and non-meaning. The sacrifice seems less frightening and the passage through the void promises to be smoother:

...a straightaway from the toxic past into

the fusion-lit reaches of a coming time! (28-29)

This is a “straight shot” from dead to living form, through a portal unclogged by paradox, conundrums of prosopopoeia or a materiality of

language. Figurality, like matter, would be recycled into new forms without remainder.

A version of this phantasmic recycling is Blake's Golgonooza (E 154-56), the city of art that tears itself down and rebuilds itself continually, where the qualifier "continually" ensures that there is never a moment when renewal gets stuck in a fetishization of ruin. In a related figure, Ammons describes garbage trucks crawling up massive ziggurats to heave dead culture into the fire. For Blake and Ammons, the impulse to identify with ruin is decadence, and a symptom of passive imagination. The imperative is to keep creativity moving. In this trope of renewal however, there is anxiety surrounding the limit point at which waste turns into something new—it is not quite continuous. There is some doubt that there could be a "straightaway" through this recycling portal because "shapes" are stuck at the doorway, caught between nature and culture, animacy and inanimacy. What is the "literal" in language that gets stuck at the threshold, refusing to pass through and generate new metaphors—yet taking on shapes? Integrity is "left out" of matter, transport is left out of metaphor, and meaning is left out of words; yet, there are "shapes given..." to ruined language—"shapes given to/false matter, hamburger meat left out" (3)—given by a negative agency of imagination.

Pushed far enough, this is the territory of John Ashbery, and his framing of cliché and overheard fragments. However, we are always aware that the junk in *Garbage* is on the threshold of burning:

...a crippled plastic chair:
a played-out sports outfit: a hill myna

print stained with jelly... (9)

The sports outfit, punningly “played out,” is played out language, and the jelly stain is an intrusion from the thing-world, disrupting the illusion of the Myna bird print. What haunts these fragments is absent humanity—or a synechdochical agency that, if it existed, is now gone and unremembered; an analog of the “unremembered seas” conjured by sand dunes in “I am Ezra.” Yet Ammons refuses ruin sentiment. The crippled chair, despite its pathos, will burn.

“Burning” is among the “figurations of ongoing” that guarantee an ethical orientation toward becoming:

...corruption, misconstruction pass through the
purification of flame) old deck chairs,
crippled aluminum lawn chairs, lemon crates
with busted slats or hinges, strollers with

whacking or spinningly idle wheels: stub ends
of hot dogs: clumps go out; rain sulls deep

coals; wind slams flickers so flat they lose
the upstanding of updraft and stifle to white

lingo— (30-33)

“White lingo” is abstract language, bleached of figurality. It is energy at its lowest potential, bound in “heavy” physical or linguistic material—univocal and literal language, pointing at its own inertia:

...is a poem about garbage garbage

or will this abstract, hollow junk seem beautiful
and necessary as just another offering to the

high assimilations (that means on top where
the smoke is... (30)

Ammons declares all waste—linguistic and otherwise—recyclable.

“Permanent” waste such as “disposable diapers, good to last/five hundred years” (61) will one day succumb to mutability. Even the planet earth, submitted to all manner of degradation, “is going to/be fine, as soon as the people get off.” (109) As used-up language, garbage burns with the following *caveat*:

...but, of course, there

is some untransformed material, namely the poem
itself; the minute its transmutations end, it

becomes a relic sometimes only generations or
sets of countrywide generations can degrade: (109)

The process-poem would become a “relic” after the poet dies. The reader would read Ammons by burning him—or the poem would burn itself—and above all, burn its rhetoric of process so that it does not freeze into doctrine.

However, the only way to “burn” process is to freeze it. The poem has to pass through the still-point of its own process, encountering figurations of ongoing that do not submit to “ongoing”: figures that freeze process and trope the void.

8. Passage Through the Void

In the poem “Motion” (*Corsons Inlet*) Ammons invokes the music of a poem, which—

by the motion of
its motion resembles
what, moving, is—
the wind
underleaf white against
the tree. (54)

The “motion of its motion” functions like a gerund to freeze process—like the waving of the waving barnacle in “Corsons Inlet”—and “the wind/underleaf white against/the tree” is another freeze frame. How are they related? The resemblance is obscure enough to move us past the notion that poetic music is somehow like the wind. We might notice, instead, that the whiteness of the leaf shows the wind’s motions, much as the speaker’s dust shows the wind’s motions in “Mansion,” and that this showing recurs in Ammons. In the poem “Salience” for example, we will find the wind “shaped and kept in the/bent of trees,” its “hiss” recurring in the poem “Grassy Sound.” “Wind” spins in circles to catch itself in frozen images, or

catch the onomatopoeia of its own sound—trying to catch “the motion of its motion.”

It is not the wind but the underside of blown leaves that are white against the tree; “the wind.../white against the tree” is a metaphor. The motions of the poem resemble the motions of metaphor—they resemble themselves. Moreover, the wind reads its own motion (turning leaves of the tree as leaves of a book) like the wind in “Grassy Sound”:

The wind came as grassy sound
and between its
grassy teeth
spoke words said with grass
and read itself
on tidal creeks as on
the screens of oscilloscopes (56)

The wind “read itself” as Wordsworth’s old man “read” the brackish water for Leeches, unsettling his reflection (and himself) by stirring it. The wind, in trying to “read” its influence on the shoreline reads itself in patterns that *might* be read; i.e., in patterns that are not in themselves meaningful, though they index a meaningless impulse to take them that way. The wind whirls, trying to grasp its own power like “elemental air in a spin” (16) in a line from *Sphere*, whirling from the stasis of “unity.”

In an extended section of *Garbage*, Ammons describes whirlwinds as “conversation”—

skiddling out among the sharp bush to gather
 more sand, or just standing around idly spinning
 like elegant women put off somewhere without
 hats, but dusk's blue called them off finally,
 each to a separate valley, and by the time the
 moon chipped the range line, all the conversation
 of the day had become arroyo or talus stone... (83)

The shift from wind to stone (and back) is linguistic energy spinning through its phase changes. Here, energy is low—and “idly spinning” is a chiastic reversal of the “spinningly idle wheels” of the strollers in the garbage dump (a link that Roger Gilbert has pointed out to me). Figural motion passes through a limit of dead language (“petrification” or “stone”) to re-animate as figurality or “wind.” This is a passage through the void, facilitated by the morning sun, which awakens the whirlwinds again into motion.

There is something discontinuous about the passage from day to night (and back), from wind to stone (and back), from figural to literal (and back). Plugging the hole of this discontinuity is the sun's power to inaugurate cycles of motion:

the next day, the red-shouldered rusty hills
 woke the whirlwinds, first wobbly and vague,
 but the sun, creaking the rocks... (83)

The rising sun gives the hills red shoulders, creaks the rocks into speech and sets the whirlwinds in motion—it inaugurates figural motion not unlike the sun in Paul de Man’s reading of Shelley’s “The Triumph of Life” (120).

It is worth situating Ammons’s model of language in more banal terms, by considering the well-worn catachresis “leg of the table,” whose figurality fades until “leg” literally denotes (retaining the ghost-connotation of a human leg). This dead and denoting metaphoricity is what Ammons tropes as an eroded mark (“arroyo”), “petrification” (stone) and “ruin” (talus)—a spent energy of metaphor that dulls the music of language: “all the conversation/of the day had become arroyo or talus stone” (82-83). However, the “time” of linguistic and geological erosion is distinct from the time of naming, when “leg of the table” picks out an object that is otherwise nameless. Figural and literal meanings emerge at once in this naming. The sun figures this power by inaugurating motions of Nature and language alike—making the void’s power seem continuous as a passage from night to day. By appeal to cycles and oscillations Ammons figures a smooth and linear passage through a non-linear void.

What would it mean to identify with motion? Imagination, identified with creative energies of the cosmos, threatens to consume reality and itself. By “reaching up into the/curvatures of unity,” the mind’s movement begins

grasping itself as frozen curvature—but checks this static consummation in
the poem “Sparklings” (*Brink Road*):

The mind derives
from the manifold

concretions and
motions of nature

motions of its own
reaching up into the

curvatures of unity
but is not

content to vanish,
extinguished, into the

resolutions of nothingness,
but precisely as the

world’s world fades
behind

projects structures of
design,

placements,
so that capability’s

entanglements can filigree
the very

freedom of nothingness... (7-8)

Between stanzas 2 and 3 is a mimetic mirror—“motions of nature/motions of
its own”—that the mind leaves behind as it moves away from reflection of

nature toward an autonomous self-grasping. However, the poem invokes a limit-point “precisely as the/world’s world fades/behind,” when the mind swerves, to “filigree/the very freedom of nothingness.” What follows is:

shining direction from
the void of unity

toward the enchantments
of what needs to be. (8)

We recognize by now that the void is a logical gap into which Ammons heaves tropes, some of them good, and some of them clunking and didactic. Imagination defends itself from self-annihilation because it can “*filigree*” the freedom of nothingness—an word that suggests ornamentation, and by extension, neo-classical notions of tropes as ornaments rather than an essentially tropological language that contains the non-human and non-verbal. Ammons describes a passage through the apocalyptic core of imagination, but unlike William Blake (whose vortex-passage he inherits) the Ammons-imagination remains tied to an inhuman void that it minimally recuperates.

Imagination transmutes the void through a “knack” or “knackery,” and in this sense it is a “small,” “smallish,” “tiny” faculty—albeit persistent as he puts it in *Sphere* (42). In *Garbage*, the “motion” of a poem is

impersonal and “scientific,” and the speaker only claims to be daubing its
 “dispositional axis” with a bit of ink here and there:

...the poem,
 which is about the pre-socratic idea of the

dispositional axis from stone to wind, wind
 to stone (with my elaborations, if any)

is complete before it begins, so I needn't
 myself hurry into brevity, though a weary reader

might briefly be done: the axis will be clear
 enough daubed here and there with a little ink (20)

The “axis” is a pre-Socratic metaphysical power, effecting phase changes. It
 triggers shifts “from stone to wind, wind/ to stone,” recalling the
 discontinuous passage from wind to talus stone, effected by the rising sun.
 The mind of a reader passes through the void-axis “from stone to wind,
 wind/to stone” using poetry as its vehicle—collapsing phase changes of
 linguistic energy into physical changes.

Ammons surmises that a human being might similarly pass through
 death as a phase-change, as in “The Time Rate of Change” (*Brink Road*):

You mosey around, idling here and
 there for years,
 unaware that a waiting is hanging

out for you, and then one day
 you feel a light hindrance
 like a floating, cut-away spider web...

With age, the hindrances increase:

...more years and a fine halter
 of dense constraints bites in,

and a kind of speed breaks out,
 not just speed but acceleration, and
 you begin to look back and also,

and with equal alarm, forward,
 and the speed picks up, the direction
 narrows, and the speed is light (17)

The constraints of physical decline accelerate the subject toward death, but this subjective speed becomes objective (or was it all along?) as the subject passes through death into pure energy.

The abstract standpoint of energy should remind us of George and Ted, the two dead friends whose standpoint was that of the dust, but also, the standpoint of an observer approaching light-speed in famous *gedanken* experiments of Einstein. There is something formal about subject pronouns (“I,” “you,” “he-she,”) that survive death in the poetry of Ammons. They are like a “filigree” or extraneous “ornament” that refuses to burn, as in

Garbage:

The heap of knickknacks (knickknackatery)
 whatnots (whatnotery), doodads, jews-harps,

belt buckles, do-funnies, files, disks, pads,
pesticide residues, nonprosodic high-tension

lines, whimpering-wimp dolls, epichlorohydrin
eslastomotors, sulfur dioxide emissions, perfume

sprays, radioactive willwaws: the people at
Marine Shale are said to be “able to turn

wastes into safe products”: but some say these
“products are themselves hazardous wastes” (108)

“Knickknacks” is an Ammon-term for the poetic faculty (a “knack”) now on the garbage heap of dead doctrine, while “nonprosodic high-tension lines” are lines of discarded poetry, reified as literal high-tension lines through the motif of declining energy, precipitating heaviness and thingness. The entire feeling of the passage is that of ungrounded and spectral energy that will not degrade; the passage ends by describing recycled waste that is waste—a figuration of ongoing that blocks ongoing—waste as a self-referential effect (“is a poem about garbage garbage?”). Is the grammatical fiction of the “I,” far from being an epiphenomenon of matter, also the material waste of a cosmos that cannot quite recycle itself?

It is an obsessional fantasy of Ammons that the “I” survives death as a formal and spectral remainder—against the Ammons who upholds annihilation without remainder. The poem “Regards Regardless” from the

1996 collection, *Brink Road* stages this tension through a speaker who contemplates death:

We had something to do for a moment
with the eternity of things, we made
contact, the sweeps deeper than we

knew, moving in and out without regard,
we, bits, too little too brief to take
the awful informings in: age edges

us aside: we vacate offices (such as
listening for the loud, dull oriole
in May) to others whose earth earth's

becoming: but, aside, we note clearly,
having them separate again, bit from
power, second from time's springs:

look, there goes eternity, still astir:
here are roses seen before: nothing's
to save us at last save loss itself:

even our gatherings, bits and pieces,
will with our central dissolving float
free, disordered, unaligned, the chairs

empty, our voices in none of the rooms:
well, it was enough, even if nothing
came of it, no, it was something even

if it becomes nothing, the show turned
full round: freedom freely
enough allowed burns free, burns us free. (16)

The speaker says of life, "it was something even/ if it becomes nothing"
asserting meaning against the void. However, "our voices in none of the

rooms” puts our voices *in* the rooms, and this is the obsessional Ammons; obsessed with the presence of an absence, and hanging around after death as a spectral standpoint. To “vacate offices” makes “offices” or “duties” sound like actual rooms vacated: as though iterated actions were concrete universals that human beings pass through. Ammons emphasizes the effect by referencing actual rooms, and by implication, his university office. What we “*note*” (notice) puns on the echoing *note* of the “loud, dull oriole/in May.” Both “note” a pattern of permanence in change: “look, there goes eternity, still astir.” Deictic markers “look, there...” and “here ...” point to Natural cycles—here now—in time, collapsing “eternity” (stasis) and “stir” (motion). However, the note is “dull” and melancholic: “...others whose earth earth’s becoming” figures eternity as entropic pull (earth is becoming them, rather than vice-versa). In this poem we find Ammons as he was in “Corsons Inlet,” still fixed on the traumatic gap between cycles of energy and mutable humanity—and still trying to trope his way out of it. The “bit” remains separated from “power,” the “second” from “time’s springs.”

All of this has a “natural” music—especially the “spontaneous” qualifications in the second to last and last lines. With the final line, we arrive at another ethical imperative, albeit obscure: “freedom freely/enough allowed burns free, burns us free” (16). “Freedom” here is freedom of

imagination in its complicity with death: imagination that burns us at the limit of its power. “Burning” is the state of a body releasing heat in the throes of chemical reactions, but it is also metaphorical identification —just as “cedes” was both annihilation and tropological identity in “Mansion.” It is not that imagination *is* annihilation; rather, it points to itself as annihilation when the literal and figural senses of “burning” collapse. As this study suggests, the agency of such a collapse is difficult to interpret. When we “allow” freedom to “burn us free” we identify with the flux of reality—but how does this identity become literal in death?

Perhaps tropes of identity are partially annihilating, and physical annihilations are partially tropological, allowing us a smooth passage through the void: we get recycled in the way that dead language recycles into living language, or the way whirlwinds start moving again when the sun rises. Such tropes of process require a still point where reality-as-process devours itself, *uroboros*-like, passing through death into new form. What mattered to Ammons is that this still-point be an ecstatic moment that reason will never find—“the one of joy and grief.

CHAPTER 5

ASHBERY'S SELF-REFERENCE

...does anyone know what's at the core of their work? I think probably that looking for the core is the core.

-John Ashbery (Ashbery 245)

The process of writing poetry becomes the poem.

-John Ashbery (Ashbery 251)

Most of my poems are about the experience of experience.

-John Ashbery (Ashbery 254)¹

1. Self-Reference

In the last chapter I examined A.R. Ammons, and his materialist-apocalyptic identification with flux, “energy” or “burning”; an energy of metaphor that short-circuits to reveal its intersection with an energy of nature—annihilating at the limit. Ashbery stages the poem’s identification with its own power—even apocalyptically (in *Syringa*)—when it folds onto itself in autonomous meaning. More typically, the poem encounters its own agency as alien. The two formal poles that animate the poetry of Ammons—performative short-circuit vs. self-indexing of power—are operative in Ashbery’s poetry as well. A tension between these poles creates a narrative “pull” in Ashbery’s poetry—the sense that that the poem is investigating its own power, and at privileged moments, manifesting the thing it is investigating. I present such a moment at the end of this chapter.

¹ All quotations from a 1983 interview in *The Paris Review*.

John Ashbery's poetry forces us to explain its self-reference, and Ashbery himself gives more than one explanation. At times, he invokes the autonomous meaning of poetic form: "I think of my poems as independent objects or little worlds which are self-referential" (Shoptaw, 211)). He also invokes the reflexivity of process-poetics, by analogy to Jackson Pollack and Willem de Kooning; the poem, like the action painting, records the history of its own making. In a 1972 interview with *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, Ashbery said that his poems present experience in abstract form as "the experience of experience." To this, we could add the "post-modern" self-reference described by David Shapiro in 1979: "Ashbery's poetry is humorously and melancholically self-reflexive and sees itself as a provisional, halting critique of naïve and degraded referential poetics" (1). Troubled by Ashbery's reflexivity, Paul Breslin says that "...his relentless self-cancellation takes away almost all that his lyrical genius gives. ...and every now and then, when he parols himself from his prison of self-reference, he writes poems that belong among the best of our time" (50).

As I read Ashbery's self-reference, metaphor seems suspended between its cognitive and non-cognitive aspects: it no longer serves particular meaning, but signals its potential for meaning, and thereby refers to its power. Ashbery has thematized this power as a "cool non-being" in his poem, "The Other Tradition"; a void, whose potential to "surprise" us is a mystery. Ashbery puts the reader on the

edge of understanding—but understanding what? There is in Ashbery’s poetry—as in a David Lynch film (one of his favorite directors)—a sense that missing information, context or ideas would make sense of things, and an equally strong sense that such context is formally excluded. Missing context signals metaphorical power that does not serve communication, and for this reason, fragments of overheard conversation appear frequently in Ashbery’s poetry, and implicate metaphor in the present tense of coincidence and accident.

Whether the present moment ever occurred and whose moment it shall be in the future is the problem of where and how to locate the time of metaphor. Read through Romantic tradition, the touch of metaphor is Wordsworth’s “unimaginable touch of time,” and the “gain and loss” of time is the “endowment” and “privation” of figures, to borrow the language of Paul de Man (“Language, as trope, is always privative” (de Man 80)). By taking on mutability as a theme, Ashbery takes on these Romantic problems. Ashbery’s poetry dramatizes a reflexive and personified metaphorical imagination, aware of its own temporality and its implication in “becoming.” There is in the telling of a story or the writing of a poem a contingency that makes it “other” to itself, “twisting the end result/Into a caricature of itself,” as Ashbery puts it in “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” (80)—a necessary deviation, “randomness” or “otherness” implicit in “creativity” that also arises in the poetry of A.R. Ammons.

How can there be something outside of language that is also inside of it—
 “too close to ignore, too far/for one to intervene” (81)? In “Self-Portrait in a
 Convex Mirror,” Ashbery thematizes this problem as the mystery of random noise
 that is constantly “tearing the matter/Of creation.../Out of our hands...” The speaker
 asserts--

That the history of creation proceeds according to
 Stringent laws, and that things
 Do get done in this way, but never the things
 We set out to accomplish, and wanted so desperately
 To see come into being. (80)

Ashbery affirms both the necessity of “accidents” and the lawless laws that unfold
 their aesthetic necessity. These laws take over when the poet turns away from her
 creation—a turn described in Ashbery’s poem “Syringa” through the myth of
 Orpheus.

As the poet turns away, the poem turns in on itself, oscillating between two
 poles of self-reference, described below:

1. The poem turns “inward” in autonomous meaning, or form.
2. The poem approaches its meaning from the outside.

Cleanth Brooks took ambiguity and paradox as poetic form, and although Ashbery
 seems to have something more like formless form in mind, he imagines an
 “inward” turn for his poems—and also dramatizes an opposite pole of self-
 reference. At the opposite pole, the poem encounters its own meaning as “other”:
 it is “self-consciously” alienated from itself. The narrative hook is that the poem,

personified through its voice(s), struggles to grasp the mysteries of its agency, and this attempt becomes the poem. Thus, Ashbery can remark, in yet another reflexive short-circuit, that “poetry does not have subject matter, because it is the subject”—a comment made to Kenneth Koch in a 1965 conversation (Ashbery). The poem is its own subject, and presents the self-consciousness of a human subject through this self-reference—the experience of experience.

The “fugue states” suffered by David Lynch’s heroines echo the predicament of Ashbery’s lyric subject, shattered by the poem’s “self-conscious” encounter with its own power. There are hints of detective or mystery scenarios, but narrative and theme are subservient to what Ashbery calls “necessity,” “other sequences,” and “other times” manifested, for example, through suggestively broken grammar and jags of association. There is a sense of suspense, and urgent vectors of intent; missing information and context not only signify metaphorical power alienated from ideas and rational sense—they also function as a narrative pull.

The role of missing context or information emerges in these lines from “Fantasia on “The Nut-Brown Maid,” from *Houseboat Days*—a mid-period volume that I will consider in some detail:

...you mention
 The slamming of a door I wasn’t supposed to know about,
 That took years. Each of us circles
 Around some vital piece of missing information,

And, at the end, as now, finding no substitute,
 Writes his own mark grotesquely with a stick in the snow,
 The signature of many connected moments of indecision.
 What I am writing to say is, the timing, not
 The contents is what matters. All this could have happened
 Long ago, or at least on some other day,
 And not meant much except insofar as the eye
 Extracts a progress from almost anything. (85)

Ashbery's poetry more than once describes a shaping or visualizing eye that imposes a sense of "progress" or narrative on "becoming." To impose meaning on a scrap of background noise—"the slamming of a closed door," for example—only draws attention to the arbitrary nature of the event. Finding "no substitute" for "some vital piece of missing information"—i.e., no *metaphorical* substitute--each of us "Writes his own mark grotesquely with a stick in the snow." This is the signature of the present tense ("many connected moments of indecision"): "What I am writing to say is, the timing, not/The contents is what matters" (85).

"And at the end, as now" suggests that the timing under discussion is the timing of this very passage of poetry, and the mark in the snow is what this poem is marking now, somewhat grotesquely, through increasingly mixed metaphors and uncertain continuity. Without the salience of a *now*, "All this could have happened/...And not meant much except insofar as the eye/Extracts a progress from almost anything"—

...But then
 It wouldn't have become a toy.
 And all the myths,

Legends and misinterpretations, would have scattered
 At a single pistol shot. And it would no longer know what
 I know. (85)

What the speaker knows is tied up in a “now” that precipitates a “toy”—or tangible event— subjected to “myths,/Legends and misinterpretations.” “Timing” is “the slamming of a door” that snaps us awake, incorporated into our dream of meaning—nothing means anything without the discontinuity of the present tense.

This passage shows an aspect of Ashbery’s poetry that his imitators often fail to reproduce: the sense that the poem is operating at a high level of abstraction or meta-level—and the sense that this meta-poem is slipping back into the poem as muted epiphany. This slippage of levels is the essence of Ashbery’s self-reference. The poem, in talking about its “now,” bleeds into that “now,” and draws attention to a connection between metaphorical time and a present tense whose “stringent laws” of becoming are a mystery—the “missing information” around which Ashbery is always circling, as does A.R. Ammons. Their poetry identifies with flux—and reflexively encounters it as the paradoxical, literalized metaphor that it is. Like Ammons, Ashbery has written poetry that articulates paradoxes of flow in a flowing style (a comparison of *Garbage* by Ammons and “Blue Sonata” by Ashbery would bring this out). Unlike Ammons, Ashbery situates creative form by abstracting it, and making the particulars aleatory.

What is “abstraction” in Ashbery’s poetry? In the 1965 conversation with Koch, Ashbery uses music as an example:

Whenever I read a sentence, including a line of my own poetry, I am beset by the idea that it could have been written any other way. When you are conscious of this while writing, it can often be very exciting. I respond to works of art which express this idea, such as the music of Busoni, the main element of whose style is that it didn’t necessarily have to sound this way (Ashbery)

“It didn’t necessarily have to sound this way” because potential form could always emerge otherwise. Ashbery creates the sense that the poem could have been otherwise through qualifications, ambiguous grammar and undercutting; he detaches metaphor from the unfolding of ideas or narrative so that it can abstractly point to its own temporality, and its entanglement in what Wordsworth called (in the *Essay Supplementary to the Preface to Poems* (1815)) “endless fluctuations and arbitrary associations” (411)—or what the novelist Walker Percy called “mistake” (79-99). Ashbery incorporates fluctuations as *style*, by analogy to the “main element” of Busoni’s style.

Stylistically, Ashbery gives the sense that he is calibrating something between metaphorical cognition and noise—by analogy to music hovering between keys or incorporating tonal ambiguities. In certain of his longer poems, it is as though he is staging a public concert for an audience that might drift in or drift out, even as the reader might scan pages and move on, nonetheless having the experience of the poem. More radically, Ashbery abstracts a phantasmic “middle

ground” between signal and noise, like a musician presenting the moment when music emerges from noise, writing its mark “grotesquely” as “the signature of many connected moments of indecision.” Bracketing the context of music (John Cage, for example), the conceit has Romantic roots: when Wordsworth describes “sounds that are/the ghostly language of the ancient earth” (1805 2.327-28 W 92) the fantasy is also that there would be something between noise and meaningful sound—the muttering of crags or the distant voice of waters. Ashbery’s poetry seems to verge on meaning, and through this seeming, metaphor points to itself as something other than a form of sympathetic imagination.

Thus, time and the time of metaphor are connected in Ashbery’s poetry. The reflexivity of experience (“the experience of experience”) is that of metaphorical imagination, trying to grasp its own temporality, and in so doing, slipping back into it. The flicker between inside and outside is the edge of sleep, where overheard voices and obscure trains of association give us a glimpse into those “other times” that Ashbery takes to be the basis of an “other tradition” in poetry and the arts. In the Romantic thematization pursued in previous chapters of this study, metaphorical imagination grasps itself as “other,” opening up a gap between metaphorical power and cognition (metaphor is “other” to itself). Another way to put it—Ashbery’s way, I suspect—is that metaphor has become “abstract.” The poem’s alien (or alienated) power posits a lyric subject, poetic voice or fragmented

voices in relation to it, located in the flicker between understanding and forgetting—or “attention and oblivion,” as Steven Knapp called this movement in his analysis of Wordsworth’s “Resolution and Independence” (106-29). Ashbery’s reader also slides in and out of understanding, sensing at charged moments that metaphor on the verge of meaning has bumped against her leg, like a house cat. What does it bring?

In contrast to this self-alienated poem, Ashbery has described his poems as “independent objects or little worlds which are self-referential”—incarnating a self-reference that is “unconscious” rather than “self-conscious” (a poem turned inward as autonomous meaning). The paradox and ambiguity of Cleanth Brooks is relevant here, but Ashbery is drawing more strongly on echoes of English poetic tradition rather than literary theory; notably, the bizarre refractions of Romantically reflexive form in the poem “Unread Pages,” by Laura Riding Jackson. What is “unread” or eludes “pagination” suggests meaning that exists whether someone reads it or not; a formal potential for meaning. In his interview with Peter Stitt Ashbery has said: “I think my poems mean what they say, and whatever might be implicit within a particular passage, but there is no message... Many critics tend to want to see an allegorical meaning in every concrete statement...” (Ashbery). Against this concreteness, the reader allegorizes, and the poem also allegorizes its own becoming, abstracts its own meaning, or frames its own power. It tries to

explain what it is doing as it is doing it, and in failing to interpret itself, instead points to its power through a slippage of allegory into concrete statement, abstraction into particularity, and meta-language into object language. In these cases, it is not just the poem's meta-discourse slipping into poetry—the meta-language of figurality is “slipping” into poetry, or succumbing to figural modification.

As the poem probes itself, its encounter with power fragments the lyric subject into multiple voices, registers, and modes of address. Insofar as Ashbery's poems struggle into self-awareness, I find a Romantic imagination in Ashbery, albeit an imagination that grasps itself as other. The poem struggles to present the navel of its dream, albeit not entirely in the language of the dream, hovering between ideas and a different kind of meaning that eludes the wakeful reader.

Wordsworth's love of the evening voluntary is relevant here: Ashbery likes to compose in late afternoon, and the gathering of dusk—the time of amphibious changes:

And last, perhaps, as darkness
Begins to infuse the lawns and silent streets
And the remote estuary, and thickens here, you mention
The slamming of a door I wasn't supposed to know about... (85)

2. As Stars Keep Off

“The Vermont Notebook” of Ashbery is a series of funny jottings illustrated by Joe Brainard, whose black and white silhouettes depict people and landscapes as banal archetypes. Ashbery writes that “the horny grocery boy may be the god Pan in disguise” (60)), and the accompanying drawing is of a young man reclining in a pornographic pose. However, Brainard erases a quarter of the boy’s face, suspending him between the particular and the generic. Elsewhere, childhood memories bleed Polaroid color: “More seagull snapshots,” Ashbery writes. “You know they reduce to brownish blobs like old Bible camp photos” (65). The blurring of particulars—like the effaced face of the grocery boy and the decomposing seagull photos—captures a suspension of particular and abstract.

In one of his Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard (published as *Other Traditions*), Ashbery examines Laura Riding Jackson’s poem “Unread Pages” at some length. What draws Ashbery to Riding is her language, and the peculiar manner in which it blurs and even collapses the distinction between abstract and particular—or the difference between the subject of the poem and the poetry itself. Here is the ending of “Unread Pages”:

Weird, pundit babyhoods
Whose blinking vision stammers out the past
Like a big-lettered foetus-future. (qtd. in Ashbery 115)

Ashbery describes the last line as “breathhtakingly ugly,” and the hints of monstrosity index a power that mostly eclipses whatever Riding is trying to get

across about poetry—but also collapses into it (monstrates, rather than demonstrates). What Riding has to say about poetry collapses into poetry, and this slippage puts her on the same (unread) page as Ashbery. Regarding “Unread Pages,” Ashbery says that “The poem as a whole anticipates a statement about poetry that Riding would make years later in *The Telling*: ‘Poetry is a sleep-maker which sits up late in us listening for the footfall of the future on today’s doorstep’ (117). In contrast, the infantile pundit “stammers out the past/Like a big-lettered foetus-future.” The latter line is weird enough to have sat up late in the tradition—late enough for Riding to have become an “other tradition” (minor tradition) by the time that Ashbery acknowledged her as an influence. It is “ugly” in a way that Ashbery finds usable—in the way that he uses Auden’s peculiar mode of personification, ripped from context. It is a statement about poetry that collapses into poetry—or what Ashbery calls “concrete” meaning—and functions as “sleepmaker” by staging that collapse.

At its inward-turning limit, the poem realizes its meaning on its “Unread Pages”:

Have sleep and midnight warmth,

Where your scant eyes see failure,
 Numbering the wakefullest page
 The dark and frosty last.

An end is a happy end only.
 And first the book’s end comes,

The printed public leaves off reading.

Then open the small secret doors,
When none's there to read awrong.
Out runs happiness in a crowd (Jackson)

There is a similarity between Riding's formulation—

Where your scant eyes see failure,
Numbering the wakefullest page
The dark and frosty last (Jackson)

—and Ashbery's formulation in "Daffy Duck in Hollywood"

...last perhaps
The pattern that may carry the sense, but
Stays hidden in the mysteries of pagination (34)

Ashbery was especially intrigued by the notion that, after the reader's numbering of the "wakefullest page," there "open the small secret doors,/When none's there to read awrong."

The numbering of wakeful pages happens by daylight in Laura Riding Jackson's poem—

As stars keep off, or to short minds
Night seems a less real time than day,
Not to be measured with or counted to
That quick self-evident sum of sun... (Jackson)

—and Riding used a similar formulation in her poem, "A City Seems":

...we stand separate and wakeful
Measuring death in miles between us... (Jackson)

The measuring or numbering that occurs by day represses desire realized in sleep:

Sleep is a single heart
 Filling the old avenues we used to know
 With miracles of dark and dread
 We dare not go to meet
 Save as our own dead stalking
 Or as two dreams walking
 One tread and terrible... (Jackson)

Dreams meet when lovers cannot. Along similar lines, “small secret doors” open to eros on the poem’s unread pages “when none’s there to read awrong.”

In his essay on Riding, Ashbery interprets her to be saying that “the reading or some related kind of activity keeps on happening ‘when none’s there to read awrong.’” But what is an activity “related” to reading, or beyond it? Regarding the lines, “Then open the small secret doors.../...“Out runs happiness in a crowd” Ashbery writes:

A crowd of what or whom? And what are these doors?
 In any case, another situation, beyond reading perhaps... (114)

Ashbery says: “The pages that come after the numbered, wakefullest one remain unread, but that is our loss, not theirs: they live on in starlit integrity, ‘happiness in a crowd.’ They do not communicate, leaving that falsifying task to their numbered predecessors” (117).

“As stars keep off” is a formulation that Ashbery called “beautiful.” The “starlit integrity” of poetic meaning echoes “the silences of the soul, picked out in/Diamonds on stygian velvet”—another line from “Daffy Duck in Hollywood.” Ashbery invokes those silences as the basis of an “other tradition” of poetry; a

background drone of existence, foregrounded, or “picked out in/Diamonds” (32).

The temporality of mistakes, free-association, and the sudden foregrounding of

background noise makes up “‘other times’” mentioned in “Daffy Duck in

Hollywood”: “...those ‘*other times*’/Are in fact the silences of the soul...” (32)

The phrase “other times” recalls Ashbery’s poem, “The System”:

But there was a time for others, that were to have got under way, sequences
that now can exist only in memory, for there were other times for them. Yet
they really existed.” (54)

The above passage explains how this temporality fixates the subject
painfully:

For instance, a jagged kind of mood that comes at the end of the day, lifting
life into the truth of real pain for a few moments before subsiding in the
usual irregular way as things do. These were as much there as anything,
things to be fumbled with, cringed before: dry churrings of no timbre,
hysterical staccato passages that one cannot master or turn away from. These
things led into life. Now they are gone but it remains, calm, lucid, but
weightless, drifting above everything and everybody like a light in the sky,
no more to be surmised, only remembered as many things that remain at
equal distances are remembered. The light drinks the dark and sinks down,
not on top of us as we had expected but far, far from us in some other,
unrelated sphere. This was not even the life that was going to happen to us.
(54)

Bare existence gets displaced into “life,” but “This was not even the life that was

going to happen to us.” The passage describes the displacement of life through

figures that drift as spatial ambiguities—“equal distances,” “not on top of us,”

“unrelated sphere”—relating “other times” and the “otherness” of figural agency.

In the myth of origins that Ashbery outlines in the beginning of “The System,” “Truth” represses raw temporality and merges with “life” to form an apparently invisible medium. A severe “Truth” assimilated “life”—but then life separated from it: “the life uncurled around it in calm waves, unimpressed by the severity and yet not paying much mind, also very much itself” (55). Life splits from “truth,” even as it splits from abstract meaning, becoming strangely personified. In “The System” the speaker says: “it is this ‘other tradition’ which we propose to explore. ...happenings that form a kind of sequence of fantastic reflections as they succeed each other at a pace and according to an inner necessity of their own...” This “inner necessity” is Ashbery’s myth of emergent form, now tied to a cosmic emergence:

It was all life, this truth, you forgot about it and it was there. No need to collect your thoughts at every moment before putting forth a hesitant feeler into the rank and file of their sensations: the truth was obstinately itself, so much so that it always seemed about to harden and shrink, to grow hard and dark and vanish into itself anxiously but stubbornly, but this was just the other side of the coin of its intense conviction. It really knew what it *was*. Meanwhile the life uncurled around it in calm waves, unimpressed by the severity and not paying much mind, also very much itself. It seemed as though innumerable transparent tissues hovered around these two entities and joined them in some way, and yet when one looked there was nothing special to be seen, only miles and miles of buoyancy, the way the mild blue sky of a summer afternoon seems to support a distant sailing bird. (55)

This “summer afternoon” echoes more than once in Ashbery’s poetry. “Daffy Duck in Hollywood” ends “Always invoking the echo, a summer’s day,” and “Syringia” ends by describing the “hidden syllables/Of what happened so long

before that/In some town, one indifferent summer” (71). “The ultimate lightness” in “The Vermont Notebook” recalls the “buoyancy” of life in the passage above, and across all of these examples, there is a sense of truth coinciding with existence. Summer is unselfconscious existence and lightness of life—sometimes figured as a lost world. However, Ashbery has also said in interviews that “there’s something death-like about summer.” In contrast to the buoyancy figured by a summer sky, there is a different kind of “life” that does not know what it is, encountering itself as “silences of the soul.” The “other times” that emerge from these moments have the “inner necessity” of “sequences” (free associations?) arising from “not-being-us.”

The poem folds on itself in the way that the subject encounters life, and this reflexivity takes two forms. Firstly, there is the inward turn of the poem into its own life so that the poem is “very much itself” as an autonomous world of meaning—doing just fine without a reader per Laura Riding Jackson (or at least Ashbery’s reading of her). Secondly, the poem encounters itself in its alterity—as potential meaning that can only be communicated as missing context, wobbles of grammar, and discontinuous narrative transitions. What happens on the poem’s unread pages is a limit of “concrete” meaning that communicates obscurely if at all, around which voices form in Ashbery’s poetry: the voice of Ashbery interviewed in poetry journals, the voices of unnamed characters in the poem,

voices overheard in coffee shops, and personifications of the poem's agency that bleed into concreteness. In an Ashbery poem, the fragmented lyric subject can speak from the standpoint of antithetical form, or from outside of it—but most often, from the liminal zone between. As the speaker states in “Daffy Duck in Hollywood”: “Life, our/Life anyway, is between.”

3. Daffy Duck in Hollywood

Ashbery claims to be abstracting “experience” in his 1972 interview with A. Poulin Jr. in *The Michigan Quarterly Review*:

Most of my poems are about the experience of experience. As I said before, the particular occasion is of lesser interest to me than the way a happening or experience filters through to me. I believe this is the way it happens with most people. I'm trying to set down a generalized transcript of what's really going on in our minds all day long. We're sitting here, presumably having a nice discussion about somebody's poetry, and yet the occasion is something else also. First of all, I'm in a strange place with lots of lights whose meaning I don't quite understand, and I'm talking about a poem I wrote years ago and which no longer means very much to me. I have a feeling that everything is slipping away from me as I'm trying to talk about it—a feeling I have most of the time, in fact. (245)

Ashbery draws attention to this slippage as a form of universal aphasia; the cusp of an abstract dream that reader and poet would share.

Ashbery has said in interviews: “I am always impressed by how difficult and yet how easy it is to get from one moment to the next of one's life—particularly while travelling...” (Stitt, 30) “The Vermont Notebook” takes up the form of this experience:

Sometimes the weary traveller suffering from jetlag prefers to be shown directly to his hotel to be sewn in the sheets from which no dream ever befalls. Weary and heartsick, emotionally battered by the voyage, the eyes overcome with fatigue, unable to read the newspaper thoughtfully provided for him he teeters on the hem of sleep, disrobing this way or that, clenching in his teeth all those distraught objects of the recent past—the way someone looked at him, seeming not seeing but just seeing. The sandwich the way it was. The coffee, how much better or how much worse than the last time. The clerk peeping at his papers. These collect and dissipate like gnats on a screen door—some penetrate the holes in the screen, others move on outside and are replaced by new shoals and whorls, but the movement is the same, grudging giving and giving back. So many marvelous empty mountains. So much eye, such frivolity. The ultimate lightness. (35)

We might expect the speaker to say that no dream befalls the weary traveller—instead, no dream falls out of the sheets into which he is sewn. A sewing motif develops and dissipates: “sewn in the sheets,” “hem of sleep, disrobing this way or that,” “seeming [seaming] not seeing...” The traveller, “clenching in his teeth all those distraught objects of the recent past” is struggling, along with the objects themselves, against a slide into the generic—struggling to maintain particular memories. However, generic and particular blur as “So many marvelous empty mountains”—the unbearable lightness of the generic particular, manifested in the American landscape. In “The System,” Ashbery will give this “ultimate lightness” the name “life,” and construct a myth of its emergence from the background drone

of existence—the collection and dissipation of gnats on a screen door, figuring the flux of recent memory and associations.

Ashbery has said that he is trying to transmit an abstract form of experience: “What I am trying to get at is a general, all-purpose experience—like those stretch socks that fit all sizes.” (250- 251) Those stretch socks are already slipping back among “distraught objects of the recent past”—sandwich, coffee, hotel clerk, *stretch socks*. It is a mild version of the aphasia he would dramatize in poetry by using slightly innapropriate figures. More ambitiously, Ashbery wants his poetry to be “the openest possible form” of experience or the “openest possible” dream; he wants to capture something universal in the passage to oblivion—the slamming of a screen door and voices overheard on the way to sleep.

The passage from wakefulness to sleep and vice-versa is an experience that we share. On closer examination however, Ashbery is not trying to abstract a common experience, but a common *form* of experience, in which metaphor no longer serves this or that meaning, but signals its abstract potential for meaning. Dramatized this way, metaphor is a mysterious quarry, manifested through a lack of narrative transitions, ambiguous pronouns and absent context. To a certain extent, the poetry re-captures metaphor as communication, but abstractions re-particularize, dead language re-animates, and meta-poetry slips into poetry. In his 1983 interview in *The Paris Review* Ashbery sais that “many critics tend to

want to see an allegorical meaning in every concrete statement...” (34); in contrast, “I think my poems mean what they say...” (35) He added that he would like his poems to be “what Stevens calls a completely new set of objects” (35). Allegory is either fading into a welter of poetic objects—or re-asserting its control over those objects. What matters for Ashbery is not one side or the other of this dichotomy, but the fact that neither side has the upper hand. Allegory might make some headway in trying to interpret a cascade of concrete poetic “objects,” but emblem and idea are always threatening to collapse into something concrete. It is then that the poem stages time as the opening and closing of allegory—which is something that the poem performs.

Here, for example, are lines from “Daffy Duck in Hollywood”—a comic poem that stages the tension between “concreteness” and allegory:

Something strange is creeping across me.
 La Celestina has only to warble the first few bars
 Of “I Thought about You” or something mellow from
Amadigi di Gaula for everything—a mint-condition can
 Of Rumford’s Baking Powder, a celluloid earring, Speedy
 Gonzales, the latest from Helen Topping Miller’s fertile
 Escritoire, a sheaf of suggestive pix on greige, deckle-edged
 Stock—to come clattering through the rainbow-trellis
 Where Pistachio Avenue rams the 2300 block of Highland
 Fling terrace. He promised he’d get me out of this one,
 That mean old cartoonist, but just look what he’s
 Done to me now! (31)

Daffy speaks from a Hollywood apartment, bunkered in with flop sweat and a strange condition: a few bars of Handel’s *Amadigi* sends a catalog of objects

“clattering through the rainbow trellis.” This violence transfers to Pistachio Avenue, which “rams the 2300 block of Highland Fling Terrace.” Ashbery tells us that this avalanche of things is impervious to allegory. Here, the struggle between allegory and concreteness is comic: the tension between “opposing forces” arises from the poem’s extended attempt to control, explain and aestheticize the alien principle usurping it.

In the lines below, the allegory is in large part a sucker’s game, but nonetheless invites interpretation:

... “Up
 The lazy river, how happy we could be?”
 How will it end? That geranium glow
 Over Anaheim’s had the riot act read to it by the
 Etna-size firecracker that exploded last night into
 A *carte du Tendre* in whose lower right-hand corner
 (Hard by the jock-itch sand-trap that skirts
 The asparagus patch of algolagnic *nuits blanches*) Amadis
 Is cozening the Princesse de Cleves into a midnight
 micturition spree
 On the Tamigi with the Wallets (Walt, Blossom, and little
 Skee-zix) on a lame barge “borrowed” from Ollie
 Of the Movies’ dread mistress of the robes. Wait!
 I have an announcement! This wide, tepidly meandering,
 Civilized Lethe (one can barely make out the maypoles
 And *chalets de necessite* on its sedgy shore) leads to Tophet,
 that
 Landfill-haunted, not-so-residential resort from which
 Some travellers return! This whole moment is the groin
 Of a borborygmia giant who even now
 Is rolling over on us in his sleep. Farewell bocages,
 Tanneries, water-meadows. The allegory comes usnarled
 Too soon; a shower of pecky acajou harpoons is
 About all there is to be noted between tornadoes. (32)

“Up the lazy river” is a Mills Brother’s reference, and their silky harmonies segue into a different voice asking: “How will it end?” The poem stands outside of its chaotic energy, before jump-cutting to “That geranium glow.” This suggests the glow of Disneyland in sky of Anaheim, lit up with its nightly airburst of fireworks—“the/Etna-size firecracker that exploded last minute into/A *carte du Tendre*...”

With the allusion to the *carte du Tendre*, “Up the lazy river” now anticipates an allegorical 16th century map whose waterways resemble a woman’s reproductive organs—pathways to love. References to the Handel-scored *Amadigi di Gaula* blur into *Gasoline Alley* (Walt, Blossom and little Skee-zix) a comic from the early decades of the 20th century whose characters aged in “real time” over the decades, blurring reality and fiction somewhat. “Wait!/I have an announcement!” seems like another interjection from the poem, likening itself to “This wide, tepidly meandering,/Civilized Lethe.” The “announcement”—all cartoon sweat and fever dream—answers the original question, “How will it end?” The river-journey leads past maypoles and portable toilets (“*chalets de necessite*”) and ends in “Tophet,” in the valley of Hinnon near Jerusalem, where rubbish heaps smoldered and parents sacrificed children to Moloch: “that/Landfill-haunted, not-so-residential resort from which/Some travellers return!” The “allegory” may have finally have reduced itself to some sort of statement; for example, “we are sacrificing our

children to a garbage heap that collapses high and low culture.” Alternately, “Tophet” is an arbitrary punctuation mark. Either way, “The allegory comes unsnarled too soon” implies some sort of closure, and all that is left of the autonomous poetic objects that constituted it is a shower of harpoons.

Ashbery has commented on a dynamical war between allegory and concrete statement in his interview with the *Paris Review*, with reference to “Daffy Duck in Hollywood”:

“The allegory comes unsnarled too soon,” that
might be my observation of poetry and my
poetry in particular. The allegory coming unsnarled
meaning that the various things that make it up are
dissolving into a poetic statement, and that is something
I feel is both happening and I don’t want to happen.
And, as so often, two opposing forces are working to
cancel each other out. (34)

What Ashbery means by “two opposing forces” is allegory opposing concrete statement and threatening, at the limit, the chaotic catalogs unleashed by Daffy Duck. As an example of “objects” resistant to allegory, Ashbery offers the beginning of “Daffy Duck in Hollywood: “...all these strange objects avalanche into the poem. I meant them to be there for themselves, and not for some hidden meaning.” (Ashbery 34)

At times, the poem seems to be allegorizing or figuring its becoming—but instead, there is a blurring of vehicle and tenor, emblem and idea—and a return to

the word hoard or primal chaos. At other times, we hear from a more sober and “self-aware” voice that I take to be that of metaphor, free-association—or even the voice of a particular mental association, latent in the unconscious:

...I have
 Only my intermittent life in your thoughts to live
 Which is like thinking in another language. Everything
 Depends on whether somebody reminds you of me.
 That this is fabulation, and that those “other times”
 Are in fact the silences of the soul, picked out in
 Diamonds on stygian velvet, matters less than it should. (32)

“My intermittent life in your thoughts to live” suggests the intermittent recollection of an image by association “Which is like thinking in another language.” Along these lines, whatever calls up the mental association is a personified “somebody” who “reminds you of me”—a *something* that calls up the association.

John Shoptaw quotes Ashbery from a poetry reading, associating the struggle of opposing forces in “Daffy Duck in Hollywood” with the struggle of Satan against God in *Paradise Lost*: “I seemed to have somehow associated Satan with Daffy Duck... They are somewhat alike” (203). Daffy’s mode of creation steals from the abyss—a pastiche of discarded cultural detritus, or juxtaposed castoffs. His cartoon energy is anti-lyric, moreover he is not entirely in control over it (“Something strange is creeping across me...”). Daffy molds what he steals from the landfill of Tophet-Los Angeles; he pancakes high and low culture—or creates collage-effects reminiscent of Ashbery’s own art-collages. Inasmuch there

are lyric swells amid the chaos, they float to the surface with the vague sense of childhood memory, pasted onto the “geranium glow” of an old painting. These effects are flat and formal, but they have a melancholy feeling explored elsewhere in Ashbery’s poetry: vanishings, displaced meaning and absent context.

As “prodigies of timing” (33) Ashbery’s catalogs emerge from the white noise of culture at a particular time (the 1940’s in many of the poem’s references), placed where they are in the catalog because that is where they belong at that particular moment in the poem—as though pointing to emergent form with its own laws and principles.

Ashbery is awash in mysteries of emergent form—emerging from fortuitous coincidence, mistakes and other forms of “randomness”—as these lines from “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror” suggest:

...Is there anything
To be serious about beyond this otherness
That gets included in the most ordinary
Forms of daily activity, changing everything
Slightly and profoundly, and tearing the matter
Of creation, any creation, not just artistic creation
Out of our hands, to install it on some monstrous, near
Peak, too close to ignore, too far for one to intervene? (80-81)

The alien and inhuman element of creation tears poetic material from the poet’s hands—and this force takes the form of something that is not us, and a reflection:

...This otherness, this
“Not-being-us” is all there is to look at
In the mirror... (80-81)

Inasmuch as “the history of creation proceeds according to/Stringent laws” they are lawless laws that put poet and reader almost entirely outside of them. “Daffy Duck in Hollywood” suggests that the poem itself is outside of this creative principle, facing it as an “avalanche of objects.” This “self-consciousness” self-reference of the poem is in tension with its “unconscious” self-reference—the poem as “little world”—turned inward into the navel of its dream.

In its self-awareness, “Daffy Duck in Hollywood” resists closing onto autonomously meaningful form, like a nightflower. Poetic form that “may carry the sense” is like an occulted or withdrawn God, hidden in the marine-layer smog of Los Angeles:

Low skyscrapers from lower-hanging clouds reveal
A turret there, an art-deco escarpment here, and last perhaps
The pattern that may carry the sense, but
Stays hidden in the mysteries of pagination. (34)

What are “the mysteries of pagination”? These are the pages described by Laura Riding Jackson, that cannot be numbered—or read wakefully.

“Daffy Duck in Hollywood” embraces the manifold of pop cultural sensation and pitching its tent in the middle of a highway: “...vague people on this emerald traffic-island—no,/Not people, comings and goings, more: mutterings, splatterings...” (31-32). This is the poem talking, and trying to frame the event that buried Daffy Duck in an avalanche of objects. We might get the sense that the

poem is finally catching up to its own event and reflecting on it—building toward the sense of an ending in lyrical flashes:

...Therefore bivouac we
 On this great, blond highway, unimpeded by
 Veiled scruples, worn conundrums. Morning is
 Impermanent. Grab sex things, swing up
 Over the horizon like a boy
 On a fishing expedition. No one really knows
 Or cares whether this is the whole of which parts
 Were vouchsafed—once—but to be ambling on's
 The tradition more than the safekeeping of it. This mulch for
 Play keeps them interested and busy while the big,
 Vaguer stuff can decide what it wants—what maps, what
 Model cities, how much waste space. Life, our
 Life anyway, is between. We don't mind
 Or notice any more that the sky *is* green, a parrot
 One, but have our earnest where it chances on us,
 Disingenuous, intrigued, inviting more,
 Always invoking the echo, a summer's day. (34)

“Life, our/Life anyway is between” recalls “I have/only my intermittent life in your thoughts to live/Which is like thinking in another language.” The lines play with linguistic material through the device of the crypt phrase; “this mulch for/Play” (this much foreplay) and “worn conundrums” (worn condoms).

“Daffy Duck in Hollywood” revels in linguistic found-objects that carry an opaque metaphorical charge, and the eros of fishing for them: “Grab sex things, swing up/over the horizon like a boy/On a fishing expedition.” That boy is, in part, Tom Sawyer or Huckleberry Finn, and the latter's journey down the Mississippi returns us to the lazy river of the Mills Brothers, “the little/White cardboard castle

over the Mill Run” and amorous mysteries of the *carte du Tendre*. The poem will live on a traffic island, amid the comings and goings of the freeway, trafficking in cartoon energies “while the big,/vaguer stuff can decide what it wants—what maps, what/model cities, how much waste space.” The “vaguer stuff” could be the impulse of critics to map the tradition, designate waste space, and valorize model poems—or it could be an organizing tendency in the poem itself. But, the map and the “waste space” collapse back onto the *carte du tendre* and the landfill of Tophet—the map becomes the territory. The poem has turned “inward,” to borrow a formulation of Ashbery from “Syringa,” mapping onto itself as concrete “statement.”

The collapse of allegory into concreteness is also a flattening effect: a collapse of high and low culture, idea and copy that suggests a simulacrum. However, the poem never frames itself as a post-modern manifesto, nor does it convincingly figure change as a Romantic horizon of possibility, a return to boyhood innocence or the ephemerality of a summer’s day. The boyhood fishing expedition is a metaphor of the poem that slips back into the poem—pasted on to it in the way that Ashbery pasted a young boy and a fish against the background of a dark forest in a 1972 art collage, “Poisson d’Avril.” (N.Y. Times, AR1) To whatever extent we read Ashbery as “Romantic” or “post-modern,” the more fundamental point is the poem’s relation to its power. The personified poem

hovers between “self-consciousness” and an “unconscious” collapse into autonomous poetic meaning beyond any reading—including the poem’s attempt to read itself.

4. *Syringa*

“Syringa” is another poem in Ashbery’s “mid-period” volume *Houseboat Days*; a beautiful poem that reads loss through the myth of Orpheus and his misguided attempt to retain Eurydice (“Of course Eurydice vanished into the shade;/She would have even if he hadn’t turned around”). Orpheus sings his loss this way:

...Singing accurately
So that the notes mount straight up out of the well of
Dim noon and rival the tiny, sparkling yellow flowers
Growing around the brink of the quarry encapsulizes
The different weights of the things... (70)

These flowers are “syringa”—from “syrinx” in the Greek, meaning hollow reed, and recalling a Greek myth. When Pan chased Syrinx through the river Ladon, she appealed for help to the nymphs, and they changed her into river reeds. Grasping those reeds instead of Syrinx, Pan became transfixed by the way they transmuted his agonized breath into music, and he made pipes. The name of Syrinx thereby migrated through language, dismembered into syllables and injected into Ashbery’s poem as the echoing of syringe/syringa/syrinx/sphinx.

Syrinx is caught in the flow of the river—and the flow of language takes up the syllables of her name. The singing of Orpheus is also caught up in the flow of numbers (meter), and the loss implied by it. The speaker speculates that this might have frustrated the Bacchantes who tore Orpheus apart:

Some say it was for his treatment of Eurydice
But probably the music had more to do with it, and
The way music passes, emblematic
Of life and how you cannot isolate a note of it
And say it is good or bad. (70)

Singing and music are metaphors for poetry, and therefore, metaphors of metaphor, and the temporality of metaphor.

The concluding lines of “Daffy Duck in Hollywood” announce that “we greet him who announces/The change as we would greet the change itself” (34) and “Syringa” clearly aligns poetic agency with change and the impossibility of arresting it:

...For although memories, of a season, for example,
Melt into a single snapshot, one cannot guard, treasure
That stalled moment. It too is flowing, fleeting. (70)

The reference to “memories of a season” and “a single snapshot” should remind us of the generic memory of summer on the beach, and the seagull photos in “The Vermont Notebook.” The mutability of all such snapshots is a fact:

...to ask more than this
Is to become the tossing reeds of that slow,
Powerful stream, the trailing grasses
Playfully tugged at, but to participate in the action

No more than this. (70)

The “tossing reeds of that slow,/Powerful stream” is a reference to Syrinx, passively caught in the river’s flow, and “playfully tugged at” by benignly personified forces that are no less external and relentless than her would-be rapist—the play of language, tugging at her name. To ask for something beyond flux (“to ask more than this”) or to identify consciously with flux (“to participate in the action”) amounts to the same thing: to be passively in its thrall like Syrinx.

The poem ends, however, with a third option. Instead of identifying with temporality—or trying to freeze it—the poem encounters its own power:

...no matter how all this disappeared,
Or got where it was going, it is no longer
Material for a poem. Its subject
Matters too much, and not enough, standing there helplessly
While the poem streaked by, its tail afire, a bad
Comet screaming hate and disaster, but so turned inward
That the meaning, good or other, can never
Become known. (71)

The theme of regret, loss and mutability has either disappeared or “got where it was going” but “no matter” because “it is no longer/Material for a poem.” “Its subject/Matters too much” because it is too important (and not enough) but also because it “matters” in an ungrammatically verbal sense of being resistant poetic material, and not material (antithetically poetic) enough. We might be reminded of “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” in which “otherness” is always “tearing *the matter*/Of creation, any creation, not just artistic creation/Out of our hands [my

italics].” Thus, the poem that “streaked by” is a poem “so turned inward/That the meaning, good or other,/can never/Become known.” “Good or other” clearly echoes the speaker’s earlier remarks about the temporal nature of music, and how “you cannot isolate a note of it and say it was good or bad.”

The temporality of metaphor, or metaphorical imagination is at stake here. Wordsworth’s famous lines from the Simplon Pass segment of *The Prelude* bear on Ashbery’s language as the passage builds to a climax:

...The singer thinks
Constructively, builds up his chant in progressive stages
Like a skyscraper, but at the last minute turns away.
The song is engulfed in an instant of blackness
Which must in turn flood the whole continent
With blackness, for it cannot see. The singer
Must then pass out of sight, not even relieved
Of the evil burthen of the words. Stellification
Is for the few, and comes about much later
When all record of these people and their lives
Has disappeared into libraries, onto microfilm.
A few are still interested in them. “But what about
So-and-so?” is still asked on occasion. But they lie
Frozen and out of touch until an arbitrary chorus
Speaks of a totally different incident with a similar name
In whose tale are hidden syllables
Of what happened so long before that
In some small town, one indifferent summer. (71)

The singer turns away from the song, and leaves it to turn on itself—reversing the turn of Orpheus. Without the singer, the song effectively dies—“engulfed in an instant of blackness.” “For it cannot see” recalls Emily Dickinson’s “I could not see to see—” from “I heard a Fly buzz—when I died.” Wordsworth wrote that “the

light of sense/Goes out in flashes” (extinguishes-propagates) (1805 6.134-5 W 240), but Ashbery makes the poem—rather than the poet—suffer “visionary” blindness.

For Ashbery, this is a moment in which metaphor no longer communicates the subject of the poem or any other idea—it streaks past the poem’s dumbfounded subject like a bad comet. The poem is “so turned inward” that “the meaning” now “can never be known,” and the conceit undoubtedly recalls Ashbery in interviews and his interest in Laura Riding Jackson: “I think of my poems as independent objects or little worlds which are self-referential” (Shoptaw, 211). Thus in “Syringa,” reflexive discontinuity and reflexive meaning are linked—the “going out” (extinction) of light is also the going out (“propagation”) of “blackness” in the way that William Empson read “goes out” in Wordsworth’s lines from the Prelude, as both extinction and propagation of light (Empson 28). The personified poem folds onto the meaning of its form, but loses consciousness in that moment. The poem’s subject was loss, and by declaring that its subject is “no longer/Material for a poem,” it stages what it is talking about.

Although “Stellification/Is for the few” is readable as “fame is for the few,” there is an echo of Laura Riding Jackson here. The vulgar majority read poetry “as stars keep off,” but what lives on in “starlit integrity,” “picked out in/Diamonds on stygian velvet,” is the “life” transmuted by form that enters the tradition by

streaking past rationally communicable meaning. As the speaker of “Syringa” puts it: “Only love stays on the brain, and something these people,/These other ones call life” (69). Although “other ones,” “other times” and “other tradition” are generic terms, I think that together, they constitute an echo that signals the movement of an irrational and renovating power of language. What brings dead poets to “intermittent life” are “hidden syllables” that they bequeath to the tradition; in Ashbery’s poem, this would include the name “Syrinx,” but also, the motif of stellification, and markers of style, such as the “over-particularized” personification of Auden examined in Chapter 2.

The last words of “Syringa” — “In some small town, one indifferent summer (71)” — invoke a traditional figure of mutability and loss: the beauty of a summer’s day, or the ephemerality of something that happened long ago, “one indifferent summer,” leaving its trace in “hidden syllables.” Elegy situates loss by “looking back” as Orpheus did in trying to retain Eurydice, and “looking back” constitutes loss or linguistic “lack” through a purely formal *reflexio* (bending back). By turning away from his song and losing it, the singer allows it to turn inward into autonomous meaning. Thus, the *poet* loses metaphor that communicates, but the *poem* gains metaphor “so turned inward/That the meaning, good or other, can never/Become known (71)” (the alterity of metaphor, or metaphorical imagination).

5. “The Other Tradition”

“The Other Tradition,” recalls the title of Ashbery’s book of literary criticism and the phrase also comes around at the beginning of Ashbery’s prose-piece, “The System,” from *Three Poems*. It is also a poem in *Houseboat Days* that begins with evening descending on a meeting in the forest:

They all came, some wore sentiments
Emblazoned on t-shirts, proclaiming the lateness
Of the hour, and indeed the sun slanted its rays
Through branches of Norfolk pine as though
Politely clearing its throat, and all ideas settled
In a fuzz of dust under trees when it’s drizzling (2)

The settling of ideas threatens closure—ameliorated somewhat by the “fuzz of dust” or the “fuzz” of a saving ambiguity, protecting poetic power. The poem will pick the line up later, when “the idea of a forest had clamped itself /Over the minutiae of the scene (3),” and its subject is this closure and its attendant oblivion.

The threat that ideas pose to poetry is a recurring concern for Ashbery; for example, in “What is Poetry?”—another poem in *Houseboat Days*:

...Trying to avoid

Ideas, as in this poem? But we
Go back to them as to a wife, leaving

The mistress we desire? (47)

By avoiding ideas, the poem opens up a dimension of metaphor that does not serve them, “hidden in the mysteries of pagination” and their invagination (fold or

inward turn). “The Mistress we desire” is seduced, rather than rationally grasped, and emerges as half-felt sense. Ideas are not rationally apprehended or imposed on the poem; rather, they emerge through a practiced inattention, as Ashbery indicates in an interview with Daniel Kane:

When one goes at ideas directly, with hammer and tongs as it were, ideas tend to elude one in a poem. I think they only come back in when one pretends not to be paying any attention to them, like a cat that will rub against your leg. (Ashbery)

“The Other Tradition,” is a poem about ideas that “settle” with a vaguely sinister and supernatural sense of night falling. There are hints that the “settling” or “clamping” of ideas onto the darkening forest marks the twilight of poet’s career and the decline of his power—at least according to the “troubadours” who gather there to meet.

The poem addresses an abstract “you,” who may also be the reader, or a personified aspect of the poem. This “you” encounters temporality—and by extension, the touch of metaphor—as a moment of forgetting and incomprehension, roaring “As with the might of waters” (1805 6.616 W 286):

The roar of time plunging unchecked through the sluices
Of the days, dragging every sexual moment of it
Past the lenses: the end of something.
Only then did you glance up from your book,
Unable to comprehend what had been taking place,
Or say what you had been reading. More chairs
Were brought, and lamps were lit, but it tells
Nothing of how all this proceeded to materialize
Before you and the people waiting outside and in the next

Street, repeating its name over and over, until silence
 Moved halfway up the darkened trunks,
 And the meeting was called to order. (2)

“You” had been reading or having an experience, but now “you” encounter the time of that reading or experience from the outside, as a voice of many waters, “dragging every sexual moment of it/Past the lenses” (past your eyes). “You” were unable to “say what you had been reading” because it was not wakeful reading, and recall nothing of the origins of the meeting (“nothing of how all this proceeded to materialize”) because “you” had been living the event that inaugurated it. This event now turns outside of you before you as “the end of something”:

“silence/moved halfway up the darkened trunks.”

People are naming this event—“...waiting outside in the next/Street, repeating its name over and over.” However, they disperse, disappointed:

...Dispersing, each of the
 Troubadours had something to say about how charity
 Had run its race and won, leaving you the ex-president
 Of the event, and how, though many of those present
 Had wished something to come of it, if only a distant
 Wisp of smoke, yet none was so deceived as to hanker
 After that cool non-being of just a few minutes before,
 Now that the idea of a forest had clamped itself
 Over the minutiae of the scene... (3)

The “you” could be a poet whose stock just dropped; he is losing his *avante garde* credentials, accused by his followers (the “troubadours”) of failing to live up to his potential. Perhaps the poem has addressed the poet as a “you”—a poem in revolt

against its author or itself, darkening with fading inspiration. It has lost its contact with “that cool non-being of just a few minutes before.” An “idea” has clamped down on the “minutiae of the scene,” or the poem’s minute particulars. The poem is losing its subject, as “Syringa” did—headed toward a collapse of map and territory (“Daffy Duck in Hollywood”), or a moment when blackness engulfs it (“Syringa”).

This is “the end of something” because the poem can no longer read itself (“only then did you glance up from your book”), nor apprehend its power, even as “a distant wisp of smoke.” The poem accuses the poet of precipitating closure, and he responds by turning away, as in “Syringa”:

...You found this
 Charming, but turned your face fully toward night,
 Speaking into it like a megaphone, not hearing
 Or caring, although these still live and are generous
 And all ways contained, allowed to come and go
 Indefinitely in and out of the stockade
 They have so much trouble remembering, when your
 forgetting
 Rescues them at last, as a star absorbs the night. (3)

The last words of this poem—“as a star absorbs the night”—recall those “Diamonds on stygian velvet” that absorbed “silences of the soul” (“Daffy Duck in Hollywood”)—an echo of Laura Riding Jackson.

Laura Riding Jackson wrote: “Then open the small secret doors.../Out runs happiness in a crowd,” and we recall Ashbery’s remark, quoted earlier: “A crowd

of what or whom? And what are these doors? In any case, another situation, beyond reading perhaps..." (114). The "crowd" is a multitude contained by the poem—contained in the "stockade" that Ashbery describes above. These multitudes recur in different Ashbery poems, linked to forgetting and remembering. When the poet composes wakefully, he imprisons the poem's meaning, but when he forgets, he frees it. The poet abandons his poem to its inward turn, accepting criticism that he is now "the ex-president/Of the event":

... You found this
Charming, but turned your face fully toward night,
Speaking into it like a megaphone... (3)

By turning "fully" toward night, the poet forgets, and the poem responds by turning inward onto its "life." Perhaps poet and reader retain an amphibious zone of connection, half caught in forgetting and antithetical meaning. When the poet composes or the reader reads the least consciously, the life of the poem bursts out as a personified multitude: "*these* still live and are generous." This should remind us of similar formulations in *Houseboat Days*: "*those* other times" ("Daffy Duck in Hollywood"), "something *these* people,/ *These* other ones call life" ("Syringa"). Through its inward turn, the poem becomes self-identical: it knows what it is, just as the personification knows its idea (Knapp, 34)—and at this pole of reflexive closure, there is meaning that intersects with "cool non-being," or the void. Thus, the poet who turns from the poem and speaks directly into the night—"speaking

into it like a megaphone”—accepts the implication of his speech in oblivion and the loss of the poem.

6. Emergent Order

The void, for Ashbery, may be a religious notion—as it was for A.R. Ammons. Richard Howard has noted that Ashbery “has never dismissed the religious possibility of emptiness—affectedness, abjection—as *the* condition of fulfillment,” and “what he would call the necessity of emptiness—boredom, confusion, irritation, even torment.” In this view, Ashbery accepts loss to “reach a world...where experience is...‘presented and released’” (47). I take this to mean that Ashbery accepts paradoxes of loss and gain, memory and forgetting—“We live in the sigh of our present” (67), as he puts it in “Blue Sonata.” Accepting flux and loss is the end-game of A.R. Ammons as well—albeit through an ultimately apocalyptic identification with change. For both poets however, time is not just existential, spiritual and psychic. Time is the time of metaphor, and the negativity of time is the underside of metaphor, looming under sympathetic identity (“my love is a rose”) like the hidden part of an iceberg.

“Blue Sonata” is a poem in *Houseboat Days* that examines time--only to read it as the time of metaphor:

...It would be tragic to fit
 Into the space created by our not having arrived yet,
 To utter the speech that belongs there,
 For progress occurs through re-inventing

These words from a dim recollection of them,
 In violating that space in such a way as
 To leave it intact. Yet we do after all
 Belong here, and have moved a considerable
 Distance; our passing is a façade.
 But our understanding of it is justified. (67)

“Re-inventing/These words” is metaphorical renewal, which keeps the *space* of arrival open rather than closing it; i.e., “re-inventing” checks the arrival of meaning—“violating that space in such a way as/To leave it intact.” Although it “would be tragic” to “utter the speech that belongs there” (the speech of arrival and closure), metaphor violates closure by partaking in ongoing flux. “Yet we do after all/Belong here” the speaker asserts; we belong *here* by uttering speech that never arrives here, thereby keeping the present moment open.

The speaker asserts that we “have moved a considerable/Distance”—then abruptly declares: “our passing is a façade.” The poem then ends with the words: “But our understanding of it is justified.” “Our passing” implies Zeno-like paradoxes of space that undermine the continuity of the present moment. Put another way, the continuous present and the flowing line are dead metaphors that baffle comprehension—surprising us with the antithetical underside of metaphor. Although its facade is musically continuous, “Blue Sonata” harbors a kernel of incomprehensibility that touches the void:

...It is
 The present past of which our features,
 Our opinions are made. We are half it and we

Care nothing about the rest of it. We
 Can see far enough ahead for the rest of us to be
 Implicit in the surroundings that twilight is.
 We know that this part of the day comes every day
 And we feel that, as it has its rights, so
 We have our right to be ourselves in the measure
 That we are in it and not some other day, or in
 Some other place. The time suits us
 Just as it fancies itself, but just so far
 As we not give up that inch, breath
 Of becoming before becoming may be seen,
 Or come to seem all that it seems to mean now. (66)

We are implicated in becoming, and by extension implicated in the attempt of becoming to figure itself, so that “becoming may be seen,/Or come to seem all that it means now.” This “seeming” or “seeming meaning” is a façade. Our understanding of it “is justified” because the passage resolves on a self-referential “now” that is the “now” of the poem and the final note of a “sonata.” In this way, the poem presents time by collapsing into its own moment.

When read quickly, the passage is something like a sonata played with fluidity and precision. Ashbery achieves the effect through a syncopated unfolding of spatial metaphors that presents its own temporality while frustrating rational understanding. For example, the speaker tells us that our right to occupy the present moment is relative to a personified time, which “has its rights.” These rights are not staked out on the ground of the continuous present, however, but the simple present tense: “this part of the day that comes every day.” The rights of time and our rights to “this part of the day” are in a law-like relation—or so “we”

feel. The qualifications pile up and the personification intensifies: in what sense can it be said that time “fancies itself”?

Time’s self-fancy recalls the auto-erotic closure of the poem as “music,” suggesting that the temporality of the poem is temporality, *per se*. We are reminded here of the speaker in “Syringa,” who said that the singing of Orpheus probably inflamed the Bacchantes, who ripped him apart because they could not isolate a single note. Ashbery’s poem itself wrestles with the paradoxes of its own temporality: the poem investigates its “now” from the outside, and then collapses into it, in an incomprehensibly performative self-reference.

What worries Ashbery, here and throughout his poetry, is that the half of us that is “present past” (in present past tense) might extrapolate from what it can “see far enough ahead” to foreclose the uncertainty of the present:

We could re-imagine the other half, deducing it
From the shape of what is seen, thus
Being inserted into its idea of how we
Ought to proceed. (67)

Given that a “shape” is a figure in the lines above, we are implicated in “becoming,” and produce figures of becoming that are “seen” or “can come to seem to mean”—albeit at the risk of submitting to a “shape” that would capture us, would leave us “inserted into its idea of how we/Ought to proceed.”

Like A.R. Ammons, Ashbery is trying to write poetry about time that keeps time open, and the lines below sound a lot like Ammons:

...There is a grain of curiosity
 At the base of some new thing, that unrolls
 Its question mark like a new wave on the shore.
 In coming to give, to give up what we had,
 We have, we understand, gained or been gained
 By what was passing through, bright with the sheen
 Of things recently forgotten and revived. (67)

Line 4 reads “We have, we understand, gained or been gained” [my italics]; i.e., we understand that we have gained something from time—or time has gained from us. The cost of experiencing “the new thing” is the possibility that the new thing might feed on us (literally, in the case of A.R. Ammons, contemplating Darwinian nature). In the case of the above lines, however, our understanding of loss and gain is entangled in the dream-like figure of the wave, whose face is “bright with the sheen/Of things recently forgotten and revived.” These things could be memories, but they are also the entities that pass in and out of the stockade in “The Other Tradition”: “They have so much trouble remembering, when your forgetting/Rescues them at last.” “Things forgotten and revived” are “things forgotten *so that they can be revived.*” In “Blue Sonata,” these things are dead metaphors:

For progress occurs through re-inventing
 These words from a dim recollection of them,
 In violating that space in such a way as
 To leave it intact. (67)

“That space” is the space in which an idea arrives, threatening closure. To violate that space—to prevent the arrival of an idea—is to keep it open (“intact”), as a

mysterious potential for meaning. Along these lines, the alternative to “Ideas” is not “No Ideas” (with the possible exception of long stretches of Ashbery’s collection, *The Tennis Court Oath*), but something between metaphorical ideas and an incomprehensible agency of metaphor.

One way of experiencing this middle ground is to occupy the continuous present tense--only to have the facade drop away, as the impossibility of the present moment turns our minds around with the might of waters. In “The Lament Upon the Waters” from *Houseboat Days*, carnal desire (“Sex was part of this...”) seems to open a vista onto the present—a buoyant atmosphere, “clear and shapeless,” as we have seen Ashbery describe it before:

And we made much of this sort of materiality
That clogged the weight of starlight, made it seem
Fibrous, yet there was a chance in this
To see the present as it had never existed,

Clear and shapeless, in an atmosphere like cut glass. (42)

The façade of a “clear and shapeless” present abruptly falls away, and the opacity of the present descends:

At Latour-Maubourg you said this was a good thing, and
on the steps
Of Metro Jasmin the couriers nodded to us correctly, and the
Pact was sealed in the sky. But now moments surround us

Like a crowd, some inquisitive faces, some hostile ones,
Some enigmatic or turned away to an anterior form of time
Given once and for all. The jetstream inscribes a final
flourish

That melts as it stays. The problem isn't how to proceed
 But is one of being: whether this ever was, and whose
 It shall be. To be starting out, just one step
 Off the sidewalk, and as such pulled back into the glittering
 Snowstorm of stinging tentacles of how that would be
 worked out

If we ever work it out. (42-43)

The poetry alternates between figures of becoming and its spatial conundrums, and in this sense, it is not just describing experience, but hovering between a facade of “our passing” and an abyss beneath it—between a facade (face), and the thing it covers.

The speaker declares that “The problem isn't how to proceed,” and this echoes a notion from “Blue Sonata,” that in shaping, or figuring the present, we risk “Being inserted into its idea of how we/Ought to proceed”; i.e., into the figure's “idea.” Ashbery defends against figures of becoming that insert us into their ideas—not because he is deferring meaning (“my poems mean what they say”), but because ideas repress the temporality of those “other times” that constitute the “otherness” of metaphor, and by extension, the connection of metaphor to “life.” These “other times” exist between the pure potential of starting out, and actually taking the first step (“To be starting out, just one step/Off the sidewalk...”)—between the potential for meaning and the closure that results when metaphor inserts us into its idea.

The idea of “how to proceed” is especially ominous for Ashbery, since it locks in narrative structure. Thus Ashbery’s figures (above) have a “sequence,” without giving us a way to proceed. Taking a first step jerks us back into the problem of the present: “pulled back into the glittering/Snowstorm of stinging tentacles.” Metaphorical imagination becomes “self-conscious” enough to stumble on its own power, hit with the opacity of its own moment. As Ashbery stages this moment in “The Lament Upon the Waters,” the subway crowd bleeds into a crowd of personified moments—and the jet stream emblemizes time as a moving snapshot that “melts as it stays.” These are austere “snapshots” of “becoming” and Ashbery lets the gaps between these images stand: there is no larger context to synthesize them—although we might sense, obscurely, how they might be related. Motifs function similarly in Ashbery’s poetry, not as patterns or symbolic “short-hand” reducible to an overall idea, but as repeated images that bend each time like notes in an improvisation. Such as they might exist in Ashbery’s poetry, image-ideas are caught in motion--decomposing like those seagull photos of last summer, melting like a jet contrail, or blurring like an old man’s memory in Ashbery’s more recent poetry (*Chinese Whispers*).

Recurring images undergo a dream-slippage in Ashbery’s poetry—and along these lines, the image of the “picnic” crops up in “A Driftwood Altar,” from *Hotel Lautreamont*, and “Daffy Duck in Hollywood.” The basic idea might be that a

picnic has the temporality of the present, figuring a pastoral scene, caught forever in the passing moment of a summer's day. However, this notion is considerably complicated by the lines below from "Daffy Duck in Hollywood":

...the tiny
Tome that slips from your hand is not perhaps the
Missing link in this invisible picnic whose leverage
Shrouds our sense of it. (34)

The tiny tome called *Houseboat Days* (that slips from our hand as we fall asleep?) is not the "missing link" that could make sense of *Houseboat Days*. Instead, the poem's "life" is an "invisible picnic" that "bivouacs" on a freeway meridian, partaking in flux. The flux of traffic, billboards and overheard conversation is where the poem finds its "leverage," but this leverage "shrouds our sense of it" (shrouds its meaning).

Picnics also leave trash, and a recurring image in Ashbery's poetry is the piling up of driftwood, detritus, or the material remains of becoming to give it temporary "shape" (or figure it). Thus, Ashbery writes in "A Driftwood Altar," from *Hotel Lautreamont*:

...a great deal of action
scrapes what we are doing into shape, for the time being. Though I am lost
I can see other points on the island, picnics nearer
than one had thought, and closer still, the one who comes
to resolve it all, provided you sign a document (82)

Through these visible picnics, "Becoming" is "taking shape" (figuring itself).

From his vantage point, the speaker is lost, but notices "other points on the island,

picnics nearer/than one had thought” and this suggests a sinister closure: “the one who comes to resolve it all.” “To resolve it all” is to end the story--perhaps by signing a contract between writer and reader and precipitating a weird image: “airplanes in their spotted plumage were seen to waver, and sink, drifting/on the wind’s tune that gets in cracks here, the same/old bore, the thing already learned” (82).

Metaphorical drift—drifting like “airplanes in their spotted plumage”—gets its lift from the “tune” of the invisible and antithetical present. This must end at some point, and Ashbery has said that his poems have an implicit timer in an interview with Mark Ford: “...what ‘urges’ (rather too strong a word) me to stop is a sudden feeling that it would be pointless to continue. I’ve often described this as a kind of timer that goes off to tell me the poem is done and I must remove it from the oven” (67). “A Driftwood Altar” ends this way:

For it is indecent to last long:
 one shot of you aghast in the mirror is quite enough; fog mounts
 gnarled roots of the trees and one could still
 stop it in time. There has to be no story, although it is
 bedtime and the nursery animals strike expectant, sympathetic poses.
 And then in a quiet but tense moment the crossed
 identities are revealed, the rightful heir stands in the doorway.
 True, it is only a picture, but someone framed and hung it;
 it is apposite. And when too many moods coincide, when all windows
 give on destruction, its curfew anchors us
 in logic, not reprehensible anymore, nor even exemplary,
 though emblematic, as some other person talking in an old car would be.
 (82)

The overheard voice of “some other person talking in an old car” is emblematic of estranged metaphorical meaning—and by extension, metaphor that points to its own intersection with the void. The ending of this poem is emblematic in that way—but how? The ending of “A Driftwood Altar” is an example of performative self-reference: by talking abstractly about the sense of an ending, the poem ends, and the effect is smooth as a rope trick.

“One shot of you aghast in the mirror” could be the poem facing itself, and “fog mounts/gnarled roots of the trees” recalls the sinister closure that descended on the forest in “The Other Tradition”: “silence/ moved halfway up the darkened trunks...” Here, however, “one could still stop it time.” The speaker is anxious not just about the end of the story, but about the notion that there would be a story to end: “There has to be no story.” Nonetheless, “it is/bedtime and the nursery animals strike expectant, sympathetic poses.” Peripety descends: “And then in a quiet but tense moment the crossed/Identities are revealed.” This is not just an imposed ending; the speaker clearly states that an organizing principle is emerging—the sense of an ending is coming from somewhere: “True, it is only a picture, but someone framed and hung it; it is apposite.” Who or what framed this picture and why is it the right one? This is a mystery—and the narrative hook of the passage.

The picture emerges when “too many moods coincide”—when the proliferation of Ashbery’s “mental climates” is no longer a liberation or openness—when “all windows/give on destruction.” At that point, a picture freezes time: “its curfew anchors us/in logic.” This picture resembles a stock moment of closure from the Aristotelean cookbook—“the crossed identities revealed”—but it is “not reprehensible anymore, not even exemplary”; i.e., it is not a dead rule. The ending of the story is “emblematic, as some other person talking in an old car would be,” and the conceit of overheard voices is very much emblematic in Ashbery, as I noted in beginning this chapter. Overheard voices foreground ambient noise when overheard in reality, and at the border of sleep, they are hallucinatory: they exemplify the “otherness” that is constantly, subtly, “tearing the matter/Of creation.../Out of our hands” (77), as Ashbery puts it in “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.”

By talking about peripety or discovery the poem stages a discovery about what it is doing: it has been talking about ending in order to end, thereby staging the timing of an ending. “What I am writing to say is, the timing, not/The contents, is what matters (85)” is how Ashbery puts it in “Fantasia on ‘The Nut-Brown Maid.’” We are free to wonder what dictates the timing of an ending—or punctuates a free-association. Is it the unconscious, an inhuman principle of emergent order, or an obscurely religious void? The poetry has nothing to say

about this, for it operates at a high level of abstraction. The poem ends because the cooking timer on an oven went off—the poem is done. Such an ending is “emblematic” of time—it arrives from somewhere else, with a strange necessity: although it is “only a picture,” it is “apposite.” The form of such an ending surprises us with its feeling of quiet legitimacy, as the endings of so many Ashbery poems do. We do not quite know who “hung” this picture, and neither does Ashbery.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

1. Deferral in *The Prelude*

Talk about figurality is a “saying” that occurs “outside” of figurality, in a meta-language. Such talk assumes distinctions (between tenor and vehicle, literal and figural, difference and sameness) that rationalize figurality. In this study I have argued that reflexive figures modify those constraints to signify power. Power might be construed in many ways, and I have focused on two main interpretations in this study:

1. Power that is meaningless and extra-linguistic
2. Power that is antithetical, but proper to tropological imagination and language

In concluding I want re-examine the forms of reflexivity examined in this study—and generalize them further. Along these lines, we might imagine a reflexive figure that attacks assumptions underlying notions of “power.”

In his reading of Freud’s *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (“Freud and the Scene of Writing”) Jacques Derrida analyzes the notion of “power” as a mark of force, or depth of an impression. Derrida examines Freud’s idea of neurons “which would oppose contact-barriers to the quantity of excitation” (201). Such neurons, by resisting force, register and “defer” its power. Derrida calls Freud’s theory a “metaphor” (“this hypothesis is

remarkable as soon as it is considered as a metaphorical model and not a neurological description” (200)) and makes a conceptual move that is “reflexive” in the sense of modifying the notions that rationalize Freud’s metaphor of “breaching.” Firstly, Derrida conceives force as a difference in forces (the difference between the resisting substance and the force that breaches), and secondly, this difference would be passed along or repeated from the beginning (201).

In Derrida’s words:

1. “There is not pure breaching without difference.”
2. “Repetition adds no quantity of present force, no intensity; it reproduces the same impression—yet it has the power of breaching.” (201)

In Wordsworth’s doctrine of imagination we find binaries that rationalize the idea of impressive power—and a reflexive imagination that modifies them. “Accidents” impress images on the mind, and do so through an impression called an “archetype” (1799, 1.280-87, W 15). From this angle, a cut/graving/impression—whether an archetype, a cut in the mother—or the Gondo gorge (ostensibly cut by a primal deluge)—has an imaginary depth that cannot be assimilated to a mark of force. In the Bless’d Babe sequence of *The Prelude*, for example, the babe who “Does gather passion from his mother’s eye” appears to inaugurate a figural movement “to combine/In one appearance all the elements/And parts of the same object”

(1799, 2.267-79, W 28). Yet the mother was moving (figural) from the beginning, she was already removed from the pure order of experience, her body functioning as the prop of a narrative. “Passion,” in short, is not a naïve origin.

In *The Prelude* there is activity that, while not situated in a vital order, is nonetheless distinguished by a lack of thought and self-consciousness. In *Tintern Abbey*, for example, the narrator had once experienced “An appetite: a feeling and a love,/That had no need of a remoter charm,/By thought supplied, or any interest/Unborrowed from the eye” (81-84, N 68). In retrospect, this activity seems to prop his growing love of nature so that when the narrator has fallen off from sensual pleasure gathered by the eye and ear he finds “The props of my affections were removed,/And yet the building stood, as if sustained/By its own spirit” (1799, 2.325-26, N 29). What sustains the building is an imaginary depth, described in *Tintern Abbey* as the depth of “something far more deeply interfused” (97, N 68) or as Geoffrey Hartman’s “subsistent,” “continuing spirit,” rhetorically manifested as “incremental redundance”—“through which the quality of a thing redounds upon the thing it qualifies and is perceived as its very cause” (*Unmediated Vision* 22-23). It figures a “deepening” of the mind (22), as in

Wordsworth's lines: "...I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,/That on a wild secluded scene impress/Thoughts of a more deep seclusion" (5–7, N 66).

Calling incremental redundance a "figure," Hartman sees an impression redounding on the source of that impression with a greater depth than either the impression on the mind, or the mind's on the natural scene. A depth gets "superadded," having come from neither external nature or the mind. Hartman deliberately transmutes depth into something other than phenomenal depth or its analogs—"incremental redundance" indexes power that is impossible to rationalize or localize: it is a reflexive figure that does not quite dispense with depth-as-power, although it disrupts any rational notion of what depth could be, or what Wordsworth could mean by "impress."

What Wordsworth calls "the impressive agency of fear" (436) might be rationalized as force (fear stamps impressions in the memory); yet this analogy dissolves in certain passages of the *Prelude*. In the passage below, for example, "boyish sports" are an impressive agency, and fear is bound up in characters impressed on natural forms:

Ye powers of earth, ye genii of the springs,
And ye that have your voices in the clouds,
And ye that are familiars of the lakes
And of the standing pools, I may not think
A vulgar hope was yours when ye employed
Such ministry—when ye through many a year

Thus, by the agency of boyish sports,
 On caves and trees, upon the woods and hills,
 Impressed upon all forms the characters
 Of danger and desire, and thus did make
 The surface of the universal earth
 With meanings of delight, of hope and fear,
 Work like a sea. (1799, 1.186, W 13)

“Character” carries an archaic (verbal) meaning of graving (engraving), but also, the sense of a readable letter or character. The word “charactered” is a reflexive figure when we read it as referring to its own status as a charactered mark—as though it were indexing the force that charactered it. It suggests something caught between force and meaning. Put otherwise, a “character” creates meaning with force (because it seems impressed upon forms), but it is not a phenomenal force, and not a meaning that is necessarily graspable.

In the quotation above, an apostrophe posits the ministry of the place spirits who, through the agency of boyish sports, impressed characters on natural forms that then made the surface of the earth swirl with meanings. The apostrophe is a Prospero-like conjuring of the genii—so that the naming of genii realizes the genii. This naming power not only fulfills the ministry of the genii through the exercise of Wordsworth’s poetic vocation in the present tense, but retroactively posits it.

2. Reflexive Trope and Logic

Reflexive figures are illuminated by comparison (and contrast) to paradoxes of logic. To effect paradoxical self-reference, the strong and weak liar paradoxes employ the words “I” and “this,” respectively:

1. *I am lying*
2. *This sentence is false.*

Quine wrote a paradoxical sentence that does not refer to itself directly, as the above sentences do. It refers to itself indirectly:

3. *“Yields falsehood when preceded by its quotation,” yields falsehood when preceded by its quotation.*

Quine’s sentence defines a condition under which a sentence is false, but (surprise!)—this sentence is Quine’s sentence. In connecting this paradox to the non-paradoxical self-reference employed by Kurt Godel, Douglas Hofstadter notes: “The Quine construction is quite like the Godel construction, in the way that it creates self-reference by describing another typographical entity which, as it turns out, is isomorphic to the Quine sentence itself” (499). Hofstadter describes “the processing required for understanding” (499) such a sentence; the reader must navigate the inside and outside of quotation marks (use and mention), syntax and possessive grammar to understand how it produces self-reference. Are there tropes that require a reader to step outside of figural form in order to read their self-reference?

In this study I argued that there are—reflexive tropes point to their power by blurring or otherwise operating on the dichotomies that rationalize their function (as I argued in Chapter 2). The Quine sentence entangles use and mention, although a logician would not say that figurality did the entangling (or that the paradox “indexed” linguistic power). Thus there is a difference between a self-referential trope and a self-referential paradox of logic—reflexive tropes, unlike self-referential propositions, point to their own agency, and in this way, create a cognitive blind spot of reflexive form: in propositional logic, a sentence refers to itself, and in rhetoric, figurality refers to itself.

Figures can manifest a self-reference reminiscent of logical regress. Ironic “self-consciousness,” for example, can itself be ironized, disrupting the stability of an “inside-outside” dichotomy, and a stable standpoint, “outside” of irony:

1. ...the irony(of irony(of irony(irony)))

When we grasp infinite irony, we abstract a reflexive regress that generalizes:

2....is true that (is true that (is true that (“a” is true)))

The moment we jump to the infinite case, we are confronting the “self-reference” of irony:

This sentence is ironic.

If the sentence is ironic, then it speaks ironically about its irony, but if it is not ironic then it speaks non-ironically about its irony. The above sentence resembles the strong liar paradox, considered at the beginning of this chapter...

This sentence is false.

...and it has a dual form:

This sentence is true.

We cannot determine whether this sentence is true or false. Taken rhetorically, rather than logically, the sentence looks like a reflexive trope; the “self-mentioning” of the sentence, and its indeterminable truth or falsity, are an index of power—thematizable as the power of a claim.

This quick, naïve tour through the liminal zone between rhetoric and logic should alert us to some important differences. The rhetor takes reflexive form as an index of power, but the logician does not. Moreover, to use and mention the word “Boston” is not reducible to the notion of using and mentioning a metaphor. To use a figure is to be inside of its transport or to put an audience inside of it, barring which, the figure can short-circuit, or fall flat as a incongruously literal statement. We are “inside” of good figures and “outside” of bad ones—the latter seem like affronts to sense, or

unpleasant assaults. Imagination, from this angle, is the figure of the “inside” of figurality, conceived as a form of understanding, desire, and experience. Reflexive imagination entangles its “outside” and “inside,” interrupting understanding and experience, and motivating us to interpret the disruption.

Although my focus has been on imagination and figural language, the influence of logic on literary theory might be taken into account where the theory of Romantic rhetoric and self-reference is concerned. This influence has been the subject of “science wars” in which literary theory was accused of appropriating and trivializing mathematical logic (Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man adapted the term “undecidability,” made famous by Kurt Godel’s famous paper on logic; a history of ideas traced by David Bates in “Crisis Between the Wars: Derrida and the Origins of Undecidability” (1-27)). The impulse to submit the poem to logic is present in William Empson’s analysis of reflexive imagery, or his analysis of the word “sense” in *the Prelude*. I.A. Richard’s distinction between tenor and vehicle is in some degree an attempt to submit metaphor to logical form.

Without evaluating the influence of logic on rhetorical theory (much less make any claims of my own about logic or math), I would note that that certain literary forms of self-reference naively resemble logical form. In

Laws of Form, the logician G. Spencer Brown begins his presentation of logic with the command to “Make a distinction!” The sign of distinction is a circle—which separates its inside from its outside—and therefore *is* the distinction that it signifies; the mathematician Louis Kauffman has called it “a sign of itself” (borrowing a formulation of Charles Saunders Peirce). In literary texts, a similar kind of self-reference arises. The word “written,” when written, refers to its own writtenness and its signification drew Paul de Man’s attention in “Hypogram and Inscription” (42). Reflexive form draws attention to a distinction between marks on a page, and readable marks, by highlighting the former. In reading Wordsworth’s “Inscription Intended for a Stone in the Grounds of Rydal Mount” Cynthia Chase has noted of this stone that “it is the marker of an intention that it be the marker of an intention” (76).

As I have shown in this study, a reflexive turn of trope can seem to signal the potential of language to mean, *per se* (John Ashbery), “symbolicity,” *per se* (Thomas Weiskel), the impulse to allegorize, *per se* (Steven Knapp), or writtenness, *per se* (in the case of the word “written,” when written). In the case of the dynamical vision of Blake, consummation of the “outward” world in “inward” (visionary) form indexes visionary activity, *per se*—or points to the irrational principle of its dynamism,

mythically situated as the darkness of “dark Urthona” or the creative principle of unfallen imagination (“And now he came to the Abhorred world of Dark Urthona/By Providence divine conducted...” (74.30-32, E 344)).

Performative self-reference is distinct from the above examples: power takes the form of a reflexive short-circuit in order to do something or manifest something. Such short-circuits most characteristically collapse talk about a thing and the thing itself. Pope, for example, said that Longinus “is himself the great Sublime he draws,” and in the poetry of A.R. Ammons, the energy of his digressions or identifications collapses into the natural energies it is describing—as in Shelley’s *Ode to the West Wind*. At the end of my chapter on Ashbery, I cite lines in which talk about the timing of a poem’s ending slides into an ending. I also noted that Ashbery describes his poems as “self-referential worlds” that close off in autonomous meaning with a joyful inner life.

This is perhaps strange, since autonomously creative power has a long tradition of being sinister, frightening or suspect, as in the opening to Shelley’s “The Triumph of Life”: “the Sun sprang forth/Rejoicing in his splendour...”—or, “So came a chariot on the silent storm/Of its own rushing splendour...” Geoffrey Hartman has emphasized the privation implicit in the self-inaugurating power of voice. Reading this privation in Wordsworth

through allusions to blindness (Oedipus, Milton's Sampson and Shakespeare's Gloucester), Hartman finds a trauma implicit in the notion of poetry as "inner voice": "The inner voice has a traumatic resonance that evokes the exchange of eyes for ears as if a blinding of that kind could restore Voice to its most powerful mode, that of Logos or fiat" (*Unremarkable Wordsworth* 127). Hartman claims that voice arrests time—seizing the poet with its own temporality (126-27): "Hearing voices implies a backward journeying, through mourning or mania... For what comes back with those voices is the dream of divinity of our unmediated, or self-inaugurated power" (127).

3. Wordsworth and Blake, Ammons and Ashbery

"Self-inauguration" is performatively self-referential, and Hartman invokes it to figure autonomous power, manifesting itself. In *The Unmediated Vision* Hartman highlights a "paradox of imagination," evident when imagination is "'vexing its own creation,' hiding itself or its generating source like mist" (13). In the crossing-the-Alps section of the *Prelude*, Wordsworth's apostrophe to imagination begins: "Imagination—lifting up itself" (1805, 6.525, W 240). Here, imagination's disruption is situated at the level of plot, in contrast to the reflexive figures I have situated elsewhere.

Wordsworth and his travelling companion had missed their crossing of the summit of the Alps, and after recounting his disappointment, Wordsworth is interrupted by a power that he names “imagination”—in the narrative now of composition— in lines that Hartman describes as “rapturous” and “almost self-obscuring” (40). Here is the 1850 version:

Imagination--here the Power so called
Through sad incompetence of human speech,
That awful Power rose from the mind's abyss
Like an unfathered vapour that enwraps,
At once, some lonely traveller. (1850, 6.562, W 241)

Wordsworth transmutes his past disappointment into a realization that nothing in this world can satisfy our infinite longing. Warminski takes his past disappointment as proleptic of the moment when it is read as proleptic (990). Read this way, a reflexive figure produces a reflexive stutter, but we might also read imagination interrupting linear narrative by identifying past and present—an “apocalyptic” identification. This too is an index of power, “experienced” as a disruption or blocking agent that demands to be interpreted.

The natural order is that of time and continuity (per Hartman), but imagination interrupts linear time, and by extension, linear narrative. The “unfathered vapour” arises from Shakespeare’s “dark backward and abysm of time” as “the past flowing into the present” (Hartman 40) or “an

apocalyptic moment in which past and future overtake the present” (46). As Hartman puts it, Wordsworth realizes that imagination is independent from nature (47), and there is a threat of discontinuity in this: “The song’s progress comes to a halt because the poet is led beyond nature” (46).

Nature is on the side of temporal order. In order to continue, as narrative, Wordsworth’s poetry must transmute the notion of self-obscuring imagination into an image proleptic of the soul’s “return to nature” (41): “Strong in herself and in beatitude/That hides her, like the mighty flood of Nile” (1850, 6.613-14)—“the imagination hides itself by overflowing as poetry, and is compared to the Nile which overflows its banks...” (Hartman 68-69).

Regarding Wordsworth, Hartman emphasizes “the link in him between self-consciousness and imagination”—against Blakean imagination, which is the annihilation of selfhood (344). Hartman’s Wordsworth binds imagination to nature in a dialectical relation that both liberates and constrains it, regulating its potential for temporal rupture and violent autonomy. On the “apocalyptic tendency” of Wordsworth’s imagination, Geoffrey Hartman wrote that “it remains in conflict with the social or socializing principle in human life,” and furthermore, that “Nature is at the

center of this conflict because it both binds and liberates imagination—binds it to forms that are not reducible to human meanings or purposes” (78).

Wordsworth’s poetry expresses “faith that self-renewal is possible without the violence of apocalypse” (Hartman 68), and from a rhetorical angle, this is an attempt to figure “renewal” as something other than a discontinuous break. Hartman’s Wordsworth is trying to smooth the shock of a “self-renewing,” “re-generating,” “renovating” imagination—terms that recur in *Wordsworth’s Poetry*, especially in Hartman’s analysis of crossing-the-Alps. “Regeneration” is a key Blakean term, and “renovation” is a notion that arises in Blake’s *Milton*:

There is a Moment in each Day that Satan cannot find,
Nor can his Watch Fiends find it; but the Industrious find
This Moment & it multiply: & when it once is found,
It renovates every Moment of the Day, if rightly placed (135)

Wordsworth famously invokes “renovating virtue” in the *Prelude*:

There are in our existence spots of time,
Which with distinct preeminence retain
A renovating virtue, whence, depressed
By false opinion and contentious thought,
Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight
Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired...
(1805, 11.257-78, W 478)

The Blakean Moment “*renovates* every Moment of the Day” and

Wordsworth’s spots of time “retain/A *renovating* virtue.” In the O.E.D., to

“renovate” is “to cause to be spiritually reborn” or “to invest with a new and higher spiritual nature.” Thus we have J. Bale in 1546 writing “To thys full knowledge shall we come after thys life, beyng renouated in Christ,” J. Smith in 1616, “None is renovated but such as fell away,” and Chalmers in 1817, “The Gospel...will renovate the soul” (O.E.D., 1356). As trope, renovation poses the problem of the logos in time or timeless in time—a discontinuity.

Diction is a defense against violent renewal—Hartman’s “incremental redundancy” (in which “the quality of a thing redounds upon the thing it qualifies”) is reflexive, but not disruptive: “...I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,/That on a wild secluded scene impress/Thoughts of a more deep seclusion” (5–7, N 66)). The figure entangles cognition and perception to signal a supplemental “depth” that is elusive and not localized. Along similar lines, Hartman highlights passages of Wordsworth that make it impossible to decide whether “the poet’s imagination [is] participating in or striving to break with nature” (67).

“Reflection, in Wordsworth, becomes reflexive” (Hartman 65)—but the reflexivity is not “sudden” or disruptive as in the figure of “Imagination—lifting up itself.” In referring to Wordsworth’s ascent of Mt. Snowden, Hartman stresses that “the meaning of Snowdon is not changed in

the retelling by a sudden, reflexive consciousness” (64). In contrast, Blake embraces the discontinuities of self-inaugurating power, and usurpation by voice that arrests time.

Blake claimed to have taken dictation from spirits, which incarnate the alterity of imagination as a principle interior to it. In an 1803 letter to Thomas Butts, Blake writes of one of his poems, “I may praise it since I dare not pretend to be any other than the Secretary the Authors are in Eternity” (E 730). In a recent study of Blake, John H. Jones notes of such remarks:

“Although these spirits with whom Blake claims to have conversed may have appeared to him only in his imagination, his rhetoric externalizes them, particularly when he gives them names and refers to them as others (1).

“Inspiration” originates through voices that Blake represents as “outside of himself and speaking to him” (Jones 1).

Such inspiration might be figured as auto-address, or auto-apostrophe. Allen Ginsberg; for example, had been reading Blake’s poem, “Ah! Sunflower,” and heard Blake “reciting in earthen measure”:

the voice rose out of the page to my secret ear that had never heard
before —
I lifted my eyes to the window, red walls of buildings flashed outside,
endless sky sad in Eternity (126)

Later in life, Ginsberg claimed that the voice that he heard was his own mature voice—proleptic of his vocation (*xiv*)—a reflexive figure.

Mary Jacobus says of Wordsworth that “calling the self into being through apostrophe becomes rather a matter of calling another into being.” This includes those “haunting, threatening, nightmarish, or apocalyptic voices heard throughout *The Prelude*” (152). Yet when “subsumed into transcendental Nature, the poet’s voice becomes orphic rather than bacchic”—through “Eolian visitations” (1805, 1.104, W 42) (Jacobus 153-54).

Self-inaugurating power is what Hartman translates as self-wounding and a god-like power of self-realization. Wordsworth signals the problem in “Resolution and Independence” when the speaker remarks of himself and his fellow poets (and especially Chatterton): “by our own spirits are we deified” (47, N 398). Yet the reflexivity of invocation is, in other ways, implicit in the poet’s vocation: in his analysis of apostrophe, Jonathan Culler writes that “Voice calls in order to be calling. It calls in order to dramatize voice: to summon images of its power so as to establish its identity as poetic and prophetic voice” (78).

In different ways, all of these examples situate power by invoking performative self-reference, and in the case of Blake and Wordsworth, a common theme is the disruptiveness of power. In Chapter 3, I described A.R. Ammons defending against the reflexive short-circuit of voice—

opening up the time of an identification by reporting his apostrophe to the wind. Elsewhere, he apostrophizes the power motivating his apostrophe (*Sphere*, 40-41), again giving himself time to report from “inside” of it.

Roger Gilbert has alerted me to an example of this technique in the later poem “Aubade”: “you, you are the one, the center, it is around/ you that the coming and goings gather...” After noting that “space travel and gene therapy” have displaced this “you”—“out of the woods and rocks and streams”—Ammons says that:

...what is out
there dwells in our heads now as a bit of

yearning, maybe vestigial, and it is a yearning
like a painful sweetness, a nearly reachable

presence that nearly feels like love... (23-24)

A “you” that Ammons had addressed as “outside” (“I’m personifying the contours/of the onhigh, the ways by which the world works”) turns “inside” (“there dwells in our heads”).

We can bracket the question of whether apocalyptic experience is or is not “really” an experience (A.R. Ammons did not really speak to the wind, from the standpoint of his annihilated body). The point, rather, is that accounts of such experience take the standpoint of an annihilating identification, or in the case of Ammons, claim death as the limit case of

identification. In his account of poetic inspiration in his letter to Thomas Butts, Blake is effectively split into two Blakes. Blake was raptured out of time into a timeless creative “moment, but he also remained in linear time, composing a poem:

“I have written this Poem from immediate Dictation,
twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time,
without Premeditation & even against my Will; the
Time it has taken in writing was thus rendered non-Existent...”
(E. 697)

Wordsworth deploys a famous figure of the timeless-in-time in his lines on his experience in the Gondo Gorge:

...The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls... (1805, 6.56-58, W 240)

The disruptive ingress of the timeless into mutability (which I take, also to be a formal effect in Wordsworth’s “Mutability”) is not reducible to the idea of *Dauer im Wechsel*, or permanence in patterns of change.¹ Wordsworth’s description puts the timeless into time as a discontinuity that indexes imagination (and its unimaginable moment).

Recounting his descent into the Gondo gorge following his missed crossing, Wordsworth anticipates a time when “characters of the great Apocalypse” are—as Hartman puts it—“intuited without the medium of nature.” Yet

¹ This idea may be relevant in the poetry of A.R. Ammons, which describes living things as segments of flow, and often finds pattern in motion.

Hartman insists that the episode *is*, finally, an encounter with nature (45), and notes of Wordsworth that: “unless he can respect the natural (which includes the temporal) order, his song, at least as narrative, must cease” (46).

In contrast, Blake describes Los in Jerusalem, walking up and down through the totality of time (named “6,000 years” via Biblical convention): “For Los in Six Thousand Years walks up & down continually/That not one Moment of Time be lost nor one revolution of space” (228). Los is *moving*, timelessly in time, and this seemingly impossible action defends against mutability by liberating the form of time from rational notions of cause and effect, and linear flow. In *Milton*, Blake states that “Every Time less than a pulsation of the artery/Is equal in its period and value to Six Thousand Years/For in this Period the Poet’s Work is done...” (28-29.62-64, E 126). The figure implies that “the Poet’s Work” is not in time, rather time is in the “Poet’s Work,” emanating from it as “a pulsation of the Artery.” “Every Time” is “equal” in “period and value,” where “Every Time” means every part of linear time: a minute, an hour, a year...

For Blake, the discontinuities of reflexive figurality do not index a power “outside” of imagination; rather, they signal a dynamical principle of “regeneration,” as in *Jerusalem*: “& all the tremendous unfathomable Non Ens/Of Death was seen in regenerations terrific or complacent

varying/According to the subject of discourse...” (4.33-35, E 255). In Chapter 3, I consider rebirth of form in the poetry of A.R. Ammons (especially in *Garbage*) as an analog of regeneration in Blake. This comparison is complicated by the fact that Blake would have taken the recycled forms of Ammons for “generation,” or the destruction and creation of natural forms. I have argued that Ammons takes the creation and destruction of linguistic form as the special case of nature’s dynamism (the odd mixture of the visionary and the materialistic suggesting an imagination in Ammons that operates on attempts to frame it).

As I read Ammons, there is nothing outside of energies of nature, which contain imagination, and might be continuous (in some way) with its productivity. For Blake, it is the other way around: nothing is outside of imagination—our sense of an “outside” is a delusion of self-limiting imagination. Put otherwise, there is nothing outside of imagination—although imagination does (via Gnostically-inflected reflexive trope) withdraw outside of itself to precipitate “a void outside of existence.”

In telling a story about self-limitation, Blake borrows from Jacob Boehme and Christian interpretations of Kabbalistic doctrine to construct a reflexive figure. As a first premise, Blake names existence as imagination in *Milton*: “The imagination is not a state: it is the Human existence itself”

(32.32, E 131). Near the end of *Milton*, however, the Virgin Ololon asks: “Is this the Void Outside of Existence, which if enter’d into/Becomes a Womb?” (41-42.37-8, E 142) In more detail, Blake elaborates the passage in the opening lines of *Jerusalem*: “There is a Void, outside of Existence, which if entered into/Englobes itself & becomes a Womb” (143). The void that “englobes itself” is the womb-tomb of nature, forming “outside” of imagination. This “outside” echoes the creation of Lurianic Kabbalah (“*Tzimtzum*”), in which God’s contraction from Himself into Himself, precipitates a void. Jurgen Moltmann writes: “Only when God withdraws himself to himself, and restricts and concentrates himself within himself, can he call into existence something other than himself and outside himself” (282). Gershom Scholem takes Luria’s fundamental question to be: how can God create the world out of nothing, if there is no nothing? “God was compelled to make room for the world by, as it were, abandoning a region within Himself... He withdrew in order to return to it in the act of creation and revelation” (261).

Lurianic creation poses the problem of self-negating power—which Blake interprets as self-limiting imagination. Along these lines, imagination becomes other to itself by deforming its own form—falling from visionary identification into outward-pointing language, and contractito precipitate a

“selfhood,” separate from the “outside” world. Instead of the unified Lurianic God who voluntarily withdraws, an integral humanity shatters, and the divided parts narrate the event. This is how Luria’s story echoes in *The Book of Urizen*:

Lo, a shadow of horror is risen
 In Eternity! Unknown, unprolific!
 Self-closd, all-repelling: what Demon
 Hath form’d this abominable void
 This soul-shudd’ring vacuum?—Some said
 “It is Urizen,” But unkown, abstracted
 Brooding secret, the dark power hid. (1.1-7, 69)

The void that Urizen forms recalls the void created by the Lurianic God’s withdrawal “from himself into himself.” It is a void or “vacuum” outside of prolific power, and the speaker—who transmits the “winged words” of “the Eternals”—names as a “Demon” the entity that abstracted itself from Eternity. The name “Urizen” echoes in “Lo! a shadow of horror is *risen*!” [my italics], and by nominating the void and its creator, the Eternals reify both. The Eternals are effectively feeling around in the dark, sensing a “brooding secret” or something that broods in secret—but their point of view is implicated in the fall. We cannot get an authoritative account of self-differentiation from narrative standpoints that dramatize self-differentiation.

In Blake’s myth, the self-limitation of power is a dangerous repose—but but confined (unsuccessfully) to the space that he names “Beulah,” where

the illusion of an “outside” world is a rest from visionary activity—a respite from the “wars of eternity.” The ironic awareness of this “outside” falls into a false belief that nature is external to imagination. Both Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom understood “Beulah” as the site of agreement—and tension—between Blake and Wordsworth. In the state of Beulah, at least, Blake seems to acknowledge the need to explain the relation between imagination and nature. Beulah is a defense against the unbounded “too-muchness” of “joy”—the “Wars of Eternity” whose productively dynamical contraries, such as energy and reason, love and hate, are the ground of reality. In contracting to rest, visionary power reflexively modifies those contraries, as we learn in the first lines of *Milton: Book the Second*: “There is a place where Contrarieties are equally True/This place is called Beulah” (128). Dynamical opposition gives way to mutual generosity and concord between “inside” (vision) and “outside” (idealized nature)—figured as a relation of masculine and feminine. However, “equally true” opens up the possibility of the passive, feminine contrary (nature) usurping imagination and becoming more than illusion. It is in this sense that Beulah is a “reflexive” trope: vision deforms its own form to create Beulah—it allows the creative, autonomously visionary opposition of contraries to slide into a more rational notion of “equality,” and anticipates a further fall into

“negations” (the binaries of good/evil, body/soul, inside and outside). In Blake’s revision of the Lurianically-inflected trope of self-limitation, power begins to obstruct itself with its own, reified production.

Beulah is a protectively external illusion—“a little lovely moony night.” In 1938, Milton O. Percival wrote a lyrical analysis of Beulah, noting that “Its finite forms are merciful and temporary circumscriptions of the infinite for those who can no longer endure the infinite” (56). There is a reflexive paradox buried in the above formulation: *the infinite circumscribes itself*. In *Milton*, “the Eternal Great Humanity.../ Walks among all his awful Family seen in every face/As the breath of the Almighty, such are the words of man to man” (2.15-18, E 128). The mirroring of the Eternal Man in every face is a metaphor of metaphorical identification—achieved through the Old Testament sublimity of its power:

...the wrath of God breaking bright flaming on all sides around
His awful limbs: into the Heavens he walked clothed in flames
Loud thundering, with broad flashes of flaming lightning & pillars
Of fire, speaking the Words of Eternity in Human Forms (95.6-9 252)

Blake invokes the Old Testament Jehovah to figure the awfulness of imagination—and help us to understand why the emanations, in *Milton* cried out that “the life of Man was too exceedingly unbounded/His joy became terrible to them” (30.21-22 E 128). More tellingly, they ask: “Give us a habitation & a place/In which we may be hidden under the shadow of

wings” (30.24-25 E 128). Milton O. Percival noted of the line, “hidden under the shadow of wings” that is an allusion to “the wings of the caduceus as the activity of the mind...When...the pure wings of the mind are folded, the appearances of Beulah are accepted as real” (53). The result is a “selfish cold repose” in *The Four Zoas*: “Forsaking Brotherhood & Universal love, in Selfish clay/Folding the pure wings of his mind” (133. 14, E 386).

The myth of Beulah acknowledges nature as a check on imagination, and Blake takes Wordsworth to have been one of the sleepers of Beulah, for whom the veil of power—the protective illusion “natural” objects—became a fetish, blocking a return to direct identification with visionary form in “self annihilation.” Despite misgivings, Blake had always admired Wordsworth, but the latter’s preface to *The Excursion* shook him. Blake told Crabb Robinson that it had “caused a stomach complaint that nearly killed him,” and remarked: “...what does he mean by the worlds to which the heaven of heavens is but a veil? And who is he that shall pass Jehovah unalarmed?” (45). Blake was shocked by Wordsworth’s line in his preface: “Jehovah—with his thunder, and the choir/Of shouting Angels, and the empyreal thrones—/I pass them unalarmed.” For Blake, thunder is the divine principle of voice and sympathetic identity. He is also alarmed about Wordsworth’s

aspiration to “breathe in worlds/To which the heaven of heavens is but a veil...” (N 445).

Blake interprets Wordsworth to be figuring imagination as a veil—a parodic inversion of his own figure, in which nature is the veil upon imagination. Wordsworth is rending imagination, and “ascending” into an abstract void outside of it. In his annotation, Blake refers to 1 Kings 3.1 and 11.1.8, in describing Solomon’s conversion to “heathen Mythology” and notes that “Jehovah dropped a tear & followed him by his Spirit into the Abstract void...” (Adams, 169) Hazard Adams says that Wordsworth’s passage may well have reminded Blake of his own treatment of the travels of Urizen in a natural world in Night Six of *The Four Zoas* (168), and I drew heavily from this section in Chapter 1, in comparing Urizen to the narrator of “Resolution and Independence.”

By figuring “the heaven of heavens” as a veil, modifying and obstructing the potential capacities of the human mind, Wordsworth’s lines could only have recalled to Blake his own, highly developed figure of the veil. For Blake, the veil figures the perverse self-obstruction of imagination. Blake’s feminine figure of nature is “Vala”—a pun on “veil,” and Nelson Hilton shows that Blake’s engravings and sketches also associate the veil with female genitalia, as a “curtain of flesh” or veiling “hood”—the “hood”

of self, or selfhood (146). Hilton notes that “The veil of the body epitomizes the other veils and their common function of dividing inside from outside, mind from brain and body, I from us, good from evil, woman from man” (145).

In Chapter 1 I analyzed the trembling of the emanations in *Milton*, and Blake echoes their resistance to visionary power in *Jerusalem*: “We Women tremble at the light therefore: hiding fearful the Divine vision with Curtain & Veil & fleshly Tabernacle” (134). In *Milton*, Blake indirectly issues a warning to Wordsworth when he attacks those—

Who pretend to poetry that they may destroy Imagination;
By imitation of Natures images drawn from Remembrance
These are the Sexual Garments, the Abomination of Desolation
Hiding the Human Lineaments as with an Ark & Curtains
Which Jesus rent... (41.23-27, E 141)

Nature is veiled power, and the pull of nature is a perverse pull of mystery. Hilton notes that the veil hides us “from the ecological and social reality that we are one body” (146), and by reflexive trope, it is the curtain that hides the apocalyptic body from itself. This reflexive turn is, for Blake, the essence of religions that curtain a sacred object, or mystery—as in the “Ark & Curtains” above.

Blake figures the “body” as the “living form” of imagination or unfallen figurality. The veiling of imagination (the body) is therefore the

repression of the productive contraries “that Joseph may be sold/Into Egypt for Negation, a veil the Saviour born & dying rends” (55.15-16, E 202). The veil, from this point of view, signals a shift from metaphorical identification to outward-pointing language that projects the fallen world. Northrop Frye has noted of the above quotation that the “veil” or “garment” has become Joseph’s coat of many colors, and a reference to the “Covering Cherub” of the fallen world: “the monstrous dragon who glitters in gold and precious stones.” Foster Damon had earlier noted that in Blake’s account, Joseph, as an infant, was “wrapped in needlework of emblematic texture” (224). In *Fearful Symmetry*, Frye describes the power to dispel veils, curtains and garments:

This is the power of seeing the physical appearance as the covering of the mental reality, yet not concealing its shape so much as revealing it in a fallen aspect, and so not the clothing but the body or form of the mental world, though a physical and therefore fallen body or form. If we try to visualize this development of the “clothing” symbol we get something more like a mirror, a surface which reveals reality in fewer dimensions than it actually has. (370)

Why does Frye “visualize” the metaphor of “veil-garment-curtain-clothing” as a “mirror”? Imagination sees itself in the distorted mirror of the fallen creation—it recognizes a parody of its form in the mirror of nature. Yet the figure of the mirror rationalizes the reflexive figurality of veil and garment: the veil signifies a deformation of imaginative form—and the idea that

imagination has somehow deformed itself (or been co-opted into doing so). The blindspot of this “self-limitation” is the very “veil” or blindspot that Frye is situating. Human existence has deformed its own form—and this is the thing veiled. Imagination’s “regeneration” or “renovation” has become a perverse form of self-relation under the influence of a malignant rationalization—but the “cause” in some sense, must also come from imagination itself, which *is* the human existence, as Blake asserts.

When A.R. Ammons rends the veil, the veil is not nature. The veil is a selfish standpoint or scope—an loose analog of Blakean selfhood—blown open in reading nature as apocalyptic signs:

...there is *only* meaning,
 only meaning, meanings, so many meanings,

 meaninglessness becomes what to make of so many
 meanings: and, truly, everything is *real*, so

 real, the climbing cloud-towers this morning,
 each in its individual space so white-heighted,

 silent, slow; the squirrel hide still lined here
 and there with dried curls of meat, legbones

 nearly outlined still in place, this out on the
 lawn, tossed there perhaps from the road... (*Garbage*, 86)

The implication of nature’s meaning is that it might be contained within the “widening scope” of Corsons Inlet—formal analog of an expanding Blakean

circumference. The speaker in Corsons Inlet finds himself “enjoying the freedom that/Scope eludes my grasp” (8).

In these lines, the body of the squirrel does not elude meaning, and Ammons invokes the imperative to understand ourselves as energy involved—before and after death—in energy exchanges. Yet the imperative to stay with the dead is a check on meaning, and an obstacle to identifying with energies of nature as a form of meaning. In Chapter 3 I read a passage from *Garbage*, in which a buried body is subducted into the geological layers and reared up again as “tectonic underplays, to be molten and then not/molten, again and again” and yet remains a fact: “when does a fact end?” (38) The impulse to stay with the dead and stay with mourning is an obstacle to identification with nature, and thus, what Blake called “the vegetated body” remains a “veil” or blocking agent—an index of power beyond meaning.

In his poem “Easter Morning,” A.R. Ammons refers to the death of his brother at an early age:

I stand on the stump
of a child, whether myself
or my little brother who died, and
yell as far as I can, I cannot leave this place, for
for me it is the dearest and the worst,
it is life nearest to life which is
life lost... (21)

The poem turns abruptly from staying with the dead, to the present tense of an Easter morning:

though the incompletions
(& completions) burn out
standing in the flash high-burn
momentary structure of ash, still it
is a picture-book, letter-perfect
Easter morning... (21)

In my chapter on Ammons, I made the case for “burning” as something of a master-trope of his process-poetics; an energy that often turns back on itself, as it does in the lines above, to “burn out” and stand frozen—the “momentary structure of ash” suggesting cremation, loss, and the odd tendency of process to freeze in a snapshot.

The burning of the poet—via chemical reactions that release heat and precipitate language—is implicit in every line of Ammons, and suggests something more than a figure of motion. To identify with motion is easy enough, but in the case of burning, we embrace annihilating energy:

I have sought for a joy without pain,
For a solid without fluctuation
Why will you die O Eternals?
Why live in unquenchable burnings? (2.10-13, E 70)

Spoken by Blake’s Urizen in *The Book of Urizen*, these lines are voiced by the “spectre” or blocking agent that hesitates before identification with energy. Energy for Ammons is “the residual and informing energy”

(*Garbage*, 38)—a spiritual energy—but it is also the “E” in Einstein’s famous equation. Burning is the energy literally released in metaphor’s death and renewal, the gain and loss of meaning, and the movement from particular to general and back to particular.

After a description of two great birds, circling back, perhaps catching an updraft, and moving on, Ammons ends the poem by invoking—

...the having
 patterns and routes, breaking
 from them to explore other patterns or
 better ways to routes, and then the
 return: a dance sacred as the sap in
 the trees, permanent in its descriptions
 as the ripples round the brooks
 ripplesone: fresh as this particular
 flood of burn breaking across us now
 from the sun. (22)

The lines invoke pattern (the flight of birds, ripples in a creek), but compares it to “burn” which leaves no pattern—not even ash. The burn is “fresh” by way of pointing to the leap of an ungrounded simile—a release of energy in the brain of Ammons, anticipating his return to energy (and his brother).

In the quotation below, from an interview in *The Paris Review*, Ammons invokes energy in contrasting himself with John Ashbery:

John Ashbery says that he would never begin to write a poem under the force of inspiration or with an idea already given. He prefers to wait until he has absolutely nothing to say, and then begins to find words and to sort them out and to associate with them. He likes to have the poem occur on the occasion of its occurrence rather than to

be the result of some inspiration or imposition from the outside. Now I think that's a brilliant point of view. That's not the way I work. I've always been highly energized and have written poems in spurts. From the god-given first line right through the poem. And I don't write two or three lines and then come back the next day and write two or three more; I write the whole poem at one sitting and then come back to it from time to time over the months or years and rework it. (2)

I have noted that Ammons invokes the void in his creative process and in his philosophical fragments ("everything/is theater and eternity is nothing at/all..." (*Garbage* 41)), and in lines that I examined from *Garbage*, he describes himself "sitting with an unwelcome touch of exasperation/ over a great blank" (42)—by allusion, perhaps to Milton's God who "Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast Abyss (9)."

Ammons transmutes "non-verbal energy" into a power of invocation in *Sphere*—an apostrophe to his own power of apostrophe (41). Non-verbal energy would be the essence of the "veil" for Blake: there is nothing "outside" of language. Harold Bloom, as an early reader of A.R. Ammons, took his insistence on the materiality of nature to be a darkening or obstruction of his vision, but it sets up a tension between performatively reflexive figures (identification with "burning" or motions of nature), and self-indexing power.

Ammons and Ashbery both invoke a void, but Ammons touches it and steals away with meaning, whereas Ashbery allows it to flood the gap

between figure and meaning as a creative, but aleatory power. The void, for Ashbery, is meaningless—but the other face of the void is the poem, folded on itself in autonomous meaning that is beyond any reader. In tension with this performative self-reference is the self-alienated poem:

Christmas decorations were getting crumpled in offices
by staffers slumped at their video terminals,
and dismay articulated otherness in orphan asylums
where the coffee percolates eternally, and God is not light
but God, as mysterious to Himself as we are to Him. (ATSWS, 76)

The office-drone banality, suspended institutional temporality, and “otherness” of the “orphan asylums” not only articulates “dismay,” but the distance of God from Himself. This is also the distance between the poem and its own power—which dilates to give the sense that context is slipping away.

In a 1983 interview with *The Paris Review*, Ashbery remarks: “I can concentrate on the things in this room and our talking together, but what the context is is mysterious to me. And it’s not that I want to make it more mysterious in my poems—really, I just want to make it more photographic” (32). The feeling of “everything slipping away from me” is the feeling of language slipping away—and this slippage is what Ashbery’s poetry tries to “make...more photographic,” sometimes with flashes of a bottomless Chandleresque mystery or a David Lynch movie whose heroine is caught in

a dissociative and amnesiac fugue state—not unlike Ashbery’s lyric subject.

Thematically, the poem is folding on itself to find the ground of its being, and for this reason, can take on the feeling of a detective story.

“Forties Flick,” from *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*, begins with an establishing shot from a Chandlerlesque noir, and sets up a version of a structure I have brought out with longer poems:

The shadow of the Venetian blind on the painted wall,
 Shadows of the snake-plant and cacti, the plaster animals,
 Focus on the tragic melancholy of the bright stare
 Into nowhere, a hole like the black holes in space.
 ‘In bra and panties she sidles to the window:
 Zip! Up with the blind. A fragile street scene offers itself,
 With wafer-thin pedestrians who know where they are going.
 The blind comes down slowly, the slats are slowly titled up.

Why must it always end this way?
 A dais with woman reading, with the ruckus of her hair
 And all that is unsaid about her pulling us back to her, with her
 Into the silence that night alone can’t explain.
 Silence of the library, of the telephone with its pad,
 But we didn’t have to reinvent these either:
 They had gone away into the plot of a story,
 The “art” part—knowing what important details to leave out
 And the way character is developed. Things too real
 To be of much concern, hence artificial, yet now all over the page,
 The indoors with the outside becoming part of you
 As you find you had never left off laughing at death,
 The background, dark vine at the edge of the porch. (5)

The scene begins with shadows on a wall and then blurs background, bringing the woman into focus. The woman is a stock cipher who bears the

tragedy of the noir heroine, and her melancholy is a feminine “black hole” that will threaten to swallow everything.

With the shift to “Why must it always end this way?” we are aware that the poem is “consciously” moving toward its ending. The woman who reads is *la liseuse*—stock subject of painting—and sealed off as cipher, turned inward on herself in mysterious self-containment. Her silence is in league with the background details—the shadows, the telephone pad, the pedestrians—as things that exceed the “art” part of narrative and threaten to swallow it. That these things are “too real/To be of much concern hence artificial” makes them set dressing. The dark vine at the edge of the porch was put there by an art director—and threatens to overwhelm the narrative form that would impose order on reality (albeit in a highly provisional way—“laughing at death”).

That these objects are “yet now all over the page,/The indoors with the outside becoming part of you” should remind us of the explosion of objects in “Daffy Duck in Hollywood,” analyzed in Chapter 2 (“the allegory comes unsarled too soon”). What is “all over the page” is the manner in which Ashbery’s metaphors are often threatening to insist as objects that “veil,” or index power. Narrative is being overtaken by the objects it would frame as background—and the status of these “objects” becomes mysterious.

We might also be reminded of allegory, sliding into concrete description or myth—and the thematization of that collapse as a window onto power. By staging a collapse of narrative and allegory, the poem explores its power, and through the metaphor of cinema, its final tracking shot moves in on a reflexive blind-spot—the “dark vine,” in the above poem.

I have taken “Resolution and Independence” (Chapter 1) and “There was a boy...” (Chapter 2) as examples of reflexive poems in Wordsworth’s canon. Wordsworth’s impulse to identify with inanimate objects furnishes another example in his 1802 poem, “These chairs they have no words to utter...”:

These chairs they have no words to utter
No fire is in the grate to stir or flutter
The ceiling and floor are mute as stone (Wu 528)

Wordsworth gives the chairs a lightly personified capacity for speech by saying that they lack words to utter (if they had words, would they utter them?). He compares the muteness of ceiling and floor to the muteness of stone—comparing things to things—and thereby short-circuiting the simile (as though comparisons no longer work in the logic of the thing-world). The poem is not about objects; it is about Wordsworth’s impulse to identify with them.

The speaker feels a solidarity with things that detaches him from human companionship and life, and this is a problem. The poem folds onto itself to amend that problem, and as in Ashbery's poem (above), a blank marks the speaker's self-conscious turn:

Half an hour afterwards
 I have thoughts that are fed by the sun,
 The things which I see
 Are welcome to me,
 I do not wish to lie
 Dead, dead,
 Dead, without any company.
 Here alone on my bed... (Wu 529)

The phrase: "*Half an hour afterwards*" recalls a line from "There was a boy...": "A full half-hour together I have stood/Mute..." Rather than choosing a death that resembles life, the speaker chooses the inverse: "Sweetness and breath with the quiet of death." The word "sweet" recurs in Dorothy's account of Wordsworth's notion "That it would be as *sweet* thus to lie so in the grave [my italics]..." when they are prone in the trench. In Wordsworth's brief, late poem "Come Gentle Sleep..." from the Latin of Thomas Warton, we get the following description of sleep: "How *sweet* thus living without life to lie/Thus without death how sweet it is to die. [my italics]" (Curtis, ed. 330). Thematically, the impulse is to identify with a state between life and death; however, the formal stakes are elsewhere:

figural imagination identifies with its own suspension of opposites—reified as an ontological state.

I examined this reflexive turn in Chapter 1, and in Romantic identifications with the petrified statue of vocal Memnon. In such identifications, imagination externalizes its operations as something to be read—but externalization cannot be read. There is a blindspot of reflexive form in the production of the liminal state, which emerges in *The Prelude* as a basal existence common to all things, alive or dead:

Hush'd, meanwhile,
Was the under soul, lock'd up in such a calm,
That not a leaf of the great nature stirr'd.
(1805 3.539-41, W 132)

The “under soul” promises the sleep of vulgar sense and passion at the threshold of the invisible world—an opening onto what Wordsworth called “the life of things” in *Tintern Abbey*. On the other hand, “lock'd up” has negative connotations. In *The Prelude, Book I*, the speaker, “Baffled and plagued by a mind that every hour/Turns recreant to her task” (1850, 1.257-58 W 51) detects a “subtile selfishness; that now/Locks every function up in blank reserve” (1850, 1.245-46 W 51). This in turn echoes Pope’s translation of Horace: “So slow th’ unprofitable moments roll,/That lock up all the Functions of my soul” (7).

The echo also arises in the sleeping horse passage — “his functions silently sealed up.” Wordsworth signals an ambivalence about identifying with the border state between life and death — why?

With one leg from the ground the creature stood
 Insensible and still,—breath, motion gone,
 Hairs, colour, all but shape and substance gone,
 Mane, ears, and tail, as lifeless as the trunk
 That had no stir of breath; we paused awhile
 In pleasure of the sight, and left him there
 With all his functions silently sealed up
 Like an amphibious work of Nature’s hand,
 A borderer dwelling betwixt life and death,
 A living statue or a statued life. (57-73, Wu 200-1)

“A living statue or a statued life” recalls the stonified statue of Memnon, and “Like an amphibious work of Nature’s hand” (Wordsworth) echoes “even so did nature’s hand” in Akenside’s description of the statue (the source of the metaphor of the Aeolian harp). Wordsworth responds to poetic tradition here by naturalizing the stonified giant — who is an amphibian, suspended between life and death. He put the passage in the analogy section of the five-part *Prelude* — but cut it: the horse has long been recognized as a close cousin of the Leech Gatherer, Cumberland Beggar and other of Wordsworth’s borderers — and these are not “analogies” of imagination.

Wordsworth notes that he and his companion “paused in pleasure of the sight.” What is the source of the pleasure?

1. Imagination externalizes its operations, and reads them as nature's work...
2. ...but "externalization" cannot be read.

An activity of nature that resembles the power of the imagination to suspend opposites produces an artifact that suspends opposites through its state of existence. Pope writes that the unprofitable moments "keep me from Myself," and perhaps the horse keeps Wordsworth from his imagination by presenting too passive a scene, placed among "...these appearances which Nature thrusts/Upon our notice, her own naked work." Wordsworth emphasizes that Nature's work here appears to be "Self-wrought, unaided by the human mind" (224).

The passivity or perversity that might be vexing Wordsworth here, is the usurpation of imagination by its own reified product. This would seem to be a paradox: Mont Blanc was a real object that "had usurped upon a living thought/That never more could be." How could imagination be "usurped" by its own creation? Geoffrey Hartman notes, in *Wordsworth's Poetry*, that "The Romantics, in England as in Germany, see nature as circumscribing imagination or as the product of a *self-blinded* imagination... [my italics]" (200) Imagination blinds itself with its own reified product (nature), and in my introduction, I gave Virgil's Atlas as an intersection of personification and myth that poses a blindspot of reflexive form—an anomalous

entanglement of myth and personification that seems to substantialize Atlas as a man-mountain.

In *Wordsworth's Poetry*, Hartman invokes the punishment of Virgil's Atlas as a mythical analog of the Leech Gatherer's "dire constraint." Inasmuch as Virgil's Atlas is "at once mountain and man" he differs from Ovid's Atlas who is first a man, and then changes into a mountain: "He is both at once, and it is the blended image, the stonified (to use a Blakean term) humanity that affects us" (199). By stressing the spatial metaphors of "boundary," "between" and "blend," Hartman sets up a gentle fall of the imagination into nature. The man-mountain also suffers a privative and unreconciled yoking of opposites, already suggested by the catachresis "face of the mountain," and suggesting the state of Urizen's children. In the amphibian, there is a tension between a reconciliation of opposites vs. figurality that insists (unreconciled) as contradiction or equivocation—a tension between Wordsworthian spatial metaphors of blending, bordering and betweenness, and harsh or bizarre contradictions, passively "seen" out there in the landscape.

What matters here is the connection of reified personification to the *punishment* of Atlas; Atlas stands between heaven and earth to prevent a primal and erotic collapse of the two; thus, his suffering is not just a personal

punishment, but a necessary suffering. *Someone* has to stand between earth and sky, maintaining a difference, but only by suspending the difference between life and death and becoming a man-mountain. Atlas pays for his *hubris*, but also bears “sin” formally: he produces difference by incarnating a state in which the same and the different co-exist irrationally (he bears the “sin” of a repressed poetic “logic,” in which the same and the different co-exist). Inasmuch as this “logic” is that of metaphor, Atlas incarnates it: he is a thing with the “logic” of a figure—supporting rational, cosmic order on his shoulders. Atlas is an index of imagination, rather than a figure of imagination: the rhetorical effect of “stonification” signals a tropological agency that cannot be given an intelligible shape (a figuration that cannot be figured). As a man-mountain, Atlas is an impossible object, serving as a plug in the mythico-cosmic order.

4. William Rowan Hamilton, Wordsworth and Lewis Carroll

As uncanny, or antithetical entities, “amphibians,” such as Atlas, the stonified Albion, and the sleeping horse of Wordsworth, index an antithetical power named “imagination.” Such an imagination is disorienting and alien (or *alienated* from us, as William Blake would have it, because we are outside of its autonomous form). Along similar lines, “imaginary numbers” were of interest in the nineteenth century as “impossible numbers”

or “meaningless symbols,” nonetheless extensively used by mathematicians. Leibniz said of them in 1702: “The imaginary numbers are a fine and wonderful refuge of the Divine Spirit, almost as an amphibian between being and non-being” (Agarwal, Ravi P, Kanishka Perera, Sandra Pinelas 323). William Rowan Hamilton invented new imaginary numbers, and took his power of invention as the discontinuous leap of an “abstract” mathematical imagination.

The remarks of Paul de Man, from his essay on Pascal, concern the function of zero in Pascal’s system and give a different angle on “impossible” numbers. In the quotation below, de Man naively articulates paradox of zero, and its relation to trope:

There can be no *one* without zero, but the zero always appears in the guise of a *one*, of a (some)thing. The name is the trope of the zero. The zero is always *called* a one, when the zero is actually nameless, “innominable.” (59)

As “the trope of the zero,” “one” is a naming of something nameless—reminiscent of a catachresis. Through this naming, the zero is being “assimilated to the one and thus being reinscribed into a system of cognition in which it does not belong” (69). De Man is viewing a formal system as the special case of a tropological system; moreover, the idea of formal systems seems to have influenced the idea of tropological systems. In what follows, I am not presuming to interpret math, nor endorsing the interpretation of

others; rather, I am noting the influence of mathematical logic on our notions about Romantic rhetoric and the reflexivity of language.

The introduction of negative and imaginary numbers in the eighteenth century—and the subsequent controversy surrounding their status—exemplifies the naïve (non-formal) notion of an alien element “reinscribed into a system of cognition” and this sets up an analogy between mathematics and tropological language in the story that de Man is telling. The symbol “*i*,” for imaginary number, standing for the square root of negative one, was taken to be meaningless, but *i* (and $-i$) were used to solve equations (Nahin 25).

By a (very) loose analogy, the impossible number is like an impossible concept that functions in a doctrine of imagination. What Wordsworth calls “imagination” (“through sad incompetence of human speech”) is often situated through use of the word “sense” in Wordsworth’s poetry—used in ways that are ambiguous and anomalous, as William Empson showed (25-45). The “light of sense/Goes out in flashes” (1805, 6.534-35 W 240) has the double sense of extinguishing and propagating in Empson’s reading—a pun that troubles the distinction between privation and illumination to index imagination’s “strength of usurpation.” Such words

effectively function as “plugs” in a system of tropes—the naïve analog of impossible numbers that function in a system.

What then, is an imaginary number? Squared numbers are positive; thus, the square root of -1 is impossible to imagine as a quantity:

1. $1 \times 1 = 1$
2. $-1 \times -1 = 1$
3. $\sqrt{-1} = ?$

Named as “*i*,” the square root of -1 can be used to solve equations; notably, the equation that reads “x squared equals -1” (Brown 1-5).

George Berkeley in the *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher* of 1732 noted that “the algebraic mark, which denotes the root of a negative square, hath its use in logistic operations, although it be impossible to form an idea of any such quantity” (qtd. in Pycior 229). Berkeley said that in natural language as well, we reason with signs that signify no idea: “...what is true of algebraic signs is also true of words or language, modern algebra being in fact a more short, apposite, and artificial sort of language...” (qtd. in Pycior 229). As Helena Pycior notes in *Symbols, Impossible Numbers, and Geometric Engagements*, by accepting “idealess” and arbitrary signs, Berkeley developed the “philosophy of early modern algebra as a science of signs” (210) and anticipated “the symbolical reasoning and later semiotics

that would in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries so change not only mathematics but logic, philosophy and language studies as well” (7).

“Idealeless” signs turn our attention from meaning to form, and the literary scholar will recognize in Hamilton’s philosophy of algebra a broader tension between an emerging linguistic structuralism and Romantic imagination. Hamilton invented hypercomplex numbers, which model 90-degree rotations in three-dimensional space; albeit, by suspending the commutative law of multiplication—the law stating that 2 times 3 and 3 times 2 both equal six. In Hamilton’s algebra, a times b does not equal b times a , but as Hamilton saw it, this non-commutativity—far from being an anomaly or pathology of mathematical logic—is forced on the mind by an imagination in concert with deeper laws beyond convention. It reveals the laws of the laws, the laws of the laws of the laws, and so on, up the tower of metalanguages to reveal the living laws of nature: “the Deity himself, acting according to rules and habits which human minds are permitted to discover...” (LHv.1 412). Hamilton had a gift for generalization and abstraction, and he saw it not only as an intellectual impulse, but an impulse to beauty, remarking in an 1832 lecture: “Be not surprised that there should exist an analogy, and that not faint nor distant, between that of the workings of the poetical and of the scientific imagination; and that those are kindred

thrones whereon the spirits of Milton and Newton have been placed by the admiration and gratitude of man” (245).

By “relaxing” or “suspending” a law that every schoolchild knows, Hamilton detached algebra from laws of arithmetic, and the shock-effect was analogous to that created by non-Euclidean geometry. When Hamilton’s friend John Graves discovered Octonions two months later, Hamilton noticed that the algebra violated the associative law, stating that $a \times (b \times c) = (a \times b) \times c$ —another rule that schoolchildren know by heart. Graves had earlier expressed doubts about quaternions, which extend the notion of an imaginary number (the square root of negative one):

There is still something in the system which gravels me. I have not yet any clear views as to the extent to which we are at liberty arbitrarily to create imaginaries, and to endow them with supernatural properties. If with your alchemy you can make three pounds of gold, why stop there. (233)

Graves is concerned that nothing constrains mathematical imagination—that the plasticity of law has no law. “Why stop there” implies endless systems, justified by their internal consistency—and gives us a glimpse into an abyss of nonsense, sensed by Lewis Carroll, who was disturbed by the symbolical school of algebra.

Hamilton’s invention of complex and hypercomplex numbers accelerated algebra’s abstract turn, inasmuch as it detached algebra from

quantities or numbers, dropped familiar laws of arithmetic, and suggested to some a meaningless game of letters manipulated according to arbitrary, but self-consistent laws. This was not Hamilton's view however. Hamilton felt that mathematical creativity emerged from an impulse to truth and beauty, and upon inventing/discovering the fundamental equations of hypercomplex numbers, or "quaternions," he carved them into the Brougham Bridge, in what the commemorative plaque still describes as a "flash of genius."

Quaternions broke the arithmetical law of commutativity stating that $a \times b = b \times a$, and Hamilton cut this violation into stone, framing the new numbers as an inscription poem, and marking a "moment" when imagination left its logical signature in time and space.

Helena Pycior notes that Hamilton's account of his breakthrough to quaternions on October 16, 1843 is "one of the classic descriptions of illumination in mathematics" (135). Hamilton was walking with Lady Hamilton to Dublin, and was approaching the Brougham Bridge when he conceived the equations relating the three imaginary numbers in his system, *i, j and k*:

...I then and there felt the galvanic circuit of thought *close*, and the sparks which fell from it were the *fundamental equations between i, j, k exactly such as I have used them ever since*. I pulled out on the spot a pocket-book...and made an entry... (134)

Hamilton puts himself *inside* the power that posits these numbers: “the galvanic circuit of thought” closes, along with the circuit of three-dimensional spatial rotations that quaternions model. The event, moreover, is localized in time and space—he not only marks it in his notebook, but inscribes it on the bridge, which thereafter is known as “quaternion bridge.” Hamilton had again made a leap from mathematics to the mathematics of mathematics—this time, “molding” the laws of arithmetic by appeal to the metaphor of *poeisis*.

In a letter to Coleridge that I will cite shortly, Hamilton describes his intention to “remould” the mathematics of optics. The brilliant mathematician Augustus de Morgan wrote about Hamilton after his death, emphasizing this “moulding” or “making”:

The moving power of mathematical *invention* is not reasoning, but imagination. We no longer apply the homely term *maker* in literal translation of *poet*; but discoverers of all kinds, whatever may be their lines, are *makers*; or, as we now say, have the creative genius. (LHv.3 219)

When Hamilton’s friend, Francis Edgeworth (brother of the novelist Maria Edgeworth), took mathematics to be dead law, Hamilton drafted the following response on November 20, 1829:

...I believe myself to find in mathematics what you declare you do not—a formable matter out of which to create Beauty also; and that, to my particular constitution of mind, a mathematic theory presents

even more of “the intense unity of the energy of a living spirit” than the work of a poet or an artist. (Hv1 348)

For Hamilton, mathematical imagination is forming or making and mathematics is “formable matter.” Hamilton tells Edgeworth: “you...would not so far degrade the comparative beauty of mathematical science (in comparison, I mean, with beauties of art and poetry) if you did not possess less natural or acquired powers than I do in respect to mathematical thought, and did not thereby find it a less *plastic and formable material* [my italics]” (Hv1 348). Hamilton’s friend and Victorian biographer, Robert Perceval Graves, echoed Hamilton’s metaphor in noting that Hamilton’s generalizing impulse “makes mathematics to him a region over which...imagination can successfully exercise her creative and combining energy, in devising new relations and higher laws” (Pycior 113).

Following a brilliant undergraduate career at Trinity College, Dublin, Hamilton became Astronomer Royal of Ireland in 1827 at age 22, meeting Wordsworth shortly thereafter, and noting to his sister Eliza that they spent “the evening--I might almost say the *night*--of yesterday, for he and I were taking a *midnight walk* together for a long, long time, *without any companion* except the stars and our burning thoughts and words” (262). A close friendship developed. Hamilton gave Wordsworth a passionate and

poetic account of science as something other than murdering to dissect. He argued to both Wordsworth and Coleridge that his leaps of abstraction were motivated by mathematical aesthetics, and an impulse to unity, invoking Newton:

Then Newton came; he felt that power not less than beauty was an object of intellect, that the unity of law, as well as that of form, could make the Infinite, One; he framed therefore a universe of energies; or rather, as the mind of an artist calls up many forms, he meditated on many laws and caused many ideal worlds to pass before him: and when he chose the law that bears his name, he seems to have been half determined by its mathematical simplicity, and consequent intellectual beauty, and only half by its agreement with the phenomena already observed. (LH.3 502)

For Hamilton, the theory of theory, the laws of the laws, and the laws of the laws of the laws, is a progression: by unifying nature's phenomena into ever simpler laws, mathematical imagination reveals the fit between laws of thought and laws of nature. Hamilton claimed that theoretical science is motivated and guided by faith in a harmony between mind and nature that would not be a mere contingency (per Kant). Hamilton's mathematical imagination has a moral and sympathetic dimension, bringing it closer to the "plastic power" that Wordsworth invoked in the Two-Part *Prelude*.

In Hamilton's view, the fit between mathematics and laws of physics is not just a "miracle of appropriateness" as Eugene Wigner famously put it in his 1959 lecture, "The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics" (1),

nor, as Kant claimed, is the systematicity of Nature a regulative principle for the faculty of judgement—motivating the scientist’s inquiry into Nature, without proving that Nature really is systematic, or that God made it that way. In Hamilton’s view, the fact that Nature conforms with our concept of systematicity is not contingent. Explaining his work on optics in a letter intended for Coleridge (but unsent), Hamilton wrote that he had been inspired “to remould the geometry of light by establishing one uniform method for the solution of all the problems deduced from the contemplation of one central or characteristic relation.” Hamilton added that applications were secondary: “my chief desire and hope being to introduce *harmony* and *unity* into the contemplations and reasonings of optics regarded as a *pure science*...” (LHv.1 592). Pure science is a reference to the “science” that Coleridge described in his 1825 *Aids to Reflection*: “any chain of truths which are either absolutely certain, or necessarily true for the mind from the laws and constitution of the mind itself (224-225).” In his analysis of Hamilton’s science, Thomas Hankins notes that his prediction of conical refraction seemed to him like “a marvelous agreement between the laws of phenomena and the laws of thought” (179).

During Wordsworth’s visit to his observatory, Hamilton forced the poet to defend his treatment of science in *The Excursion* (LH.1 312 – 314).

Yet Hamilton would have found in Wordsworth's *Preface*, an echo of his own sense that the mind and nature are in mysterious agreement: "How exquisitely the individual Mind.../to the external World is fitted (N 446)" — a notion that Blake famously critiqued, as an instance of mind enslaved to its own materialized creation. Hamilton never had any doubt that his quaternions would find an application in science: "I have no doubt of the applicability of the quaternions. How can a complicated and self-consistent system fail to represent complicated things with *relative* ease?" (LH.3 273).

Hamilton is, therefore, a seminal example of a deductive scientist: he predicted conical refraction through a mathematization of optics, reformulated classical mechanics in a general form that quantum mechanics absorbed decades later, and pioneered graph theory. Perhaps the most shocking example of "unreasonable effectiveness" (the inexplicable "fit" between abstract mathematical language and laws of nature) arises from the re-emergence of "octinions" in 20th and 21st century theoretical physics. These improbable numbers — invented by Hamilton's protégé Graves — are the basis of the physical theory of supersymmetry, recently supported by data from the CERN collider.

Hamilton impressed upon Wordsworth the difference between deductive science (the mathematics of mathematics, in the case of

Hamilton's abstract turn) and vulgar induction (murdering to dissect).

Hamilton pressed his case by sending along material to Wordsworth in a letter of February 1, 1830, noting: "I send you so large a quantity of prose extracts from former writings of my own, on subjects upon which we have conversed, that I will not increase the bulk of this packet by writing a long letter besides" (LH1 354). In the packet were mathematical papers, and in a letter of February 8, 1833, Wordsworth responded to Hamilton's

Introductory Lecture on Astronomy: "Your lecture I have read with much pleasure. It is philosophical and eloquent, and instructive, and makes me regret, as I have had a thousand occasions of doing, that I did not apply to Mathematics in my youth" (LH1 35).

In changes made to Book VI of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth registers the impact of Hamilton's "deductive science." In the thirteen-book *Prelude*, Wordsworth notes of laws of Nature "how they could become/Herein a leader to the human mind" (6.146-47, W 214). Compare this to the fourteen-book version, where the personified, and animating laws of nature ("immaterial agents") now submit to the mind of man:

Those immaterial agents bowed their heads
Duly to serve the mind of earth-born Man...
(6.125-126, W 215))

Thomas and Ober note the connection to Hamilton's thought (134), in which the deductive scientist—through pure mathematical abstraction—comprehends the “habits and energies of those innumerable energies which to our understanding compose the material universe” (LH.1 234). None of this feels like the Wordsworth who asserts nature's imperviousness to human purposes—least of all, the appeal to an imagination that makes the living laws of nature bow.

For Hamilton, the human mind's reading of patterned “mental” energies of nature is already the result of a more radical short-circuit that he invoked in his *Introductory Lecture on Astronomy*: “...in all the mathematical sciences we consider and compare relations. But *the relations of the pure mathematics are relations between our own thoughts themselves...*[my italics]” (644). Thought molds its “relations” by molding mathematics, and this self-molding is a discontinuous jump that Hamilton claimed as imagination. The sense is not only that the mathematics of mathematics expresses nature's laws, but that the reflexive turn of mathematics is the turning of thought upon itself, to find its own higher laws.

Hamilton is in the meta-theoretical mode recently examined by Leon Chai in his study, *Romantic Theory: Forms of Reflexivity in the Romantic*

Era. Chai does not analyze Hamilton, but the group theory invented by the 17-year old Evariste Galois is central to his study, juxtaposed with Shelley's "The Triumph of Life," Coleridge's "Aids to Reflection," and Napoleon's battle plans. Galois anticipated the abstract turn of Hamilton's algebra, and he famously proved that there is no general algebraic method for solving polynomial equations of degree four or higher. Chai notes that Galois' treatment "precludes the use of calculations," pertaining instead to a higher-order realm of theory: "In this way then, we finally come to what Galois himself termed the analysis of analysis, whereby theory reflects on itself, and so is transformed into meta-theory" (149).

Meta-theory is also the theorist's act of reflection, which Galois described as his decision "to jump with both feet over these calculations..." ("*Sauter a pieds joints sur ces calculs...*") (138) and which Chai describes as an impulse "to introduce the abstract *tout court*, without apology" (149). One might well compare this leap to the leaps of abstraction that characterize Hamilton's work. In the case of quaternions, Hamilton also introduces the abstract, *tout court*—but with an extended apology. Hamilton was unsatisfied with the notion that imaginary numbers were meaningless symbols, remarking "I always try to see past the sign to the thing signified"

(234). Notably, Hamilton re-interpreted imaginary numbers in the higher-order theory of “number couples” to make them “intelligible.”²

What drove Hamilton’s drive to abstraction was his opposition to the view of the British symbolical school, exemplified by Peacock and De

² A complex number takes the form of “ $a + bi$ ” where a and b are real numbers and “ i ” is imaginary. Complex numbers have a real part “ a ” and an imaginary part “ bi .” When we substitute “0” for “ b ,” $a + bi$ is an ordinary real number:

$$b = 0$$

$$a + bi = a$$

Hamilton’s insight emerges when we evaluate “ $a + bi$ ” in the following case:

$$a = 0$$

$$b = 1$$

$$a + bi = 0 + 1i = 0 + i = i$$

When we substitute “0” for “ a ” and “1” for “ b ,” “ $a + bi$ ” is equal to the imaginary number “ i .” It is less obvious that we might therefore define an imaginary number as the ordered pair of real numbers, (0,1). This leap gives the reader a relatively simple insight into a leap of “abstraction,” and having made it, Hamilton could claim that within the real number system (or what Hamilton calls the “theory of single numbers”), $\sqrt{-1}$ is meaningless, but within the theory of number couples, $\sqrt{-1}$ means “(0,1).” By defining complex numbers as ordered pairs of real numbers, Hamilton eliminated the meaningless symbol “ i ,” so that “ $a + bi$ ” became the ordered pair of real numbers (a,b), where the latter shares the same rules of addition, subtraction and multiplication as “ $a + bi$.”

Thus, Hamilton replaced a meaningless sign (“ i ” or $\sqrt{-1}$) in one formal system with a meaningful sign (0,1) in a “higher” system. Hamilton puts it this way: “In the *Theory of Single Numbers*, the symbol $\sqrt{-1}$ is *absurd*, and denotes an *Impossible Extraction*, or a merely *Imaginary Number*: but in the *Theory of Couples*, the same symbol $\sqrt{-1}$ is *significant*...” (Pycior 144).

1. $\sqrt{-1} = ?$ (single numbers)
2. $\sqrt{(-1,0)} = (0,1)$ (number couples)

The discontinuous cut between #1 and #2 above marks a leap of abstract imagination.

Morgan. Helena Pycior, a historian of British algebra, explains the unease caused by the symbolical approach:

...the traditional image of mathematics as a science of meaningful terms, self-evident principles and absolute truths began to crumble. Coming into vogue was a view of algebra as a study of meaningless signs and symbols, governed by somewhat arbitrary rules and subject to many different interpretations. (153)

In reaction to the beginnings of a formalist-structuralist standpoint, Hamilton increasingly drew on Wordsworth and Coleridge to assert a mathematical imagination grounded in meaning. Through Wordsworth, Hamilton met Coleridge, and through Coleridge he sought the foundations of algebra in Kant's *a priori* intuition of time. Although nineteenth century British algebra laid groundwork for modern algebra and mathematical logic, Hamilton asserted Romantic imagination against a structuralist turn that he himself accelerated in its more radical implications. Against the mathematics of mathematics, the logic of logic, and the language of language, Hamilton's letters and lectures stage a scene of mind reflecting on mind, encountering the well-springs and laws of its power.

Hamilton read *Aids to Reflection* in 1831, and adopted the view of Coleridge, who remarked: "By a science I here mean a Chain of Truths that are either absolutely certain, or necessarily true for the human mind from the laws and constitution of the mind itself" (224-25). For Peacock of the

symbolical school however, the symbols of algebra have no meaning: “interpretation will follow and not precede” (Pycior 195). The symbolical school would also unsettle a Victorian logician named Charles Dodgson, whose literary pseudonym was Lewis Carroll—but for Dodgson, Hamilton could only have been part of the problem, having “upped the ante” on abstraction by violating laws of arithmetic. In his “Alice” books, Lewis Carroll lampooned the abstract turn of algebra accelerated by Hamilton, Boole, De Morgan and Peacock. The rules governing multiplication of Hamilton’s hyper-complex numbers are the rules of the Mad Hatter’s “reasoning” according to a recent and convincing reading by Melanie Bayley (11).³

In parodying the abstract turn of algebra and geometry, Carroll exposed the pretensions of a mind that reshapes logic, reason and mathematics according to the criteria of “internal consistency.” For Carroll, such a mind is indeed “for ever Voyaging thro’ strange seas of Thought, alone,” to quote Wordsworth’s famous description of Newton’s statue—because it is solipsistically and absurdly unhinged from reality. Hamilton at one turn had speculated that quaternions might formalize the “polar logic”—or suspension of opposite poles—that had so fascinated Coleridge. What

³ Echoing the work of Helena Pycior, who first detailed Carroll’s mockery of the symbolical school of algebra (149-170).

would it mean to take non-commutativity—the principle that “ $a \times b$ ” does not equal “ $b \times a$ ” as a principle of reason—or via Coleridge, a logic of imagination?⁴

In *Through the Looking Glass*, the March hare and the Mad Hatter assault Alice with the principle of non-commutativity. The hare asks Alice to say what she means, to which she replies: “I mean what I say, that’s the same thing.” “Not the same thing a bit,” says the Hatter. Hamilton justifies non-commutative multiplication through the internal consistency of his system, but from outside of the Mad Hatter’s system, counter-intuitive laws afflict a young girl. To be “inside” the system is to be the Mad Hatter, assuming non-commutativity as a principle of reason. To be “outside” is to be Lewis Carroll’s Alice, subject to the hatter’s perverse demonstration.

A different version of this inside-outside movement drives Lewis Carroll’s parody of Wordsworth’s “Resolution and Independence.” In

⁴ In *What Coleridge Thought*, Owen Barfield remarks that, for Coleridge, polarity is “the basic act of imagination” (111). Kant’s reading of algebra, considered in Chapter 1, is a reference point for Coleridge. Borrowing from Kant, Coleridge notes that “a ball in motion & at the same time not in motion...is a contradiction in terms” (62). Yet objects are nonetheless in equilibrium everywhere we look, and $1 + -1 = 0$ in algebra, where “0” is also a contradiction from the standpoint of logic. The notion of negative quantities as “opposed forces” interests Coleridge, because positively opposed forces point beyond “dichotomy” to “trichotomy”: “...we seek first for Unity, as the only source of Reality, and then for the two opposite yet correspondent forms, by which it manifests itself” (Barfield 265). Algebraic zero suggests to Coleridge, a polarity that suspends opposites. Yet, the difference between two negations (logical and algebraic) is the index of power here, as Kant and Coleridge note (Groome 117-143), and it is also a difference between two languages: from the “standpoint” of logic, relative zero is incomprehensible, but from “inside” of algebra, it is not a contradiction.

Carroll's parody of "Resolution and Independence," the speaker encounters the drive of meter, rhyme and absurd juxtaposition through the speech of an "aged, aged man," modeled on the Leech Gatherer. Since the narrator's own thoughts are mediated by meter, rhyme and absurd juxtaposition, the encounter is self-referential and marked by oblivion:

‘Who are you, aged man?’ I said.
 ‘And how is it you live?’
 And his answer trickled through my head
 Like water through a sieve (215)

Possessed by the drive of nonsense, the speaker is also faced with it—in the person of the old man, whom he tries, at times violently, to control:

But I was thinking of a plan to dye one's whiskers green,
 And always use so large a fan
 That they could not be seen.
 So having no reply to give
 To what the old man said,
 I cried, ‘Come tell me how you live,’
 And thumped him on the head. (215)

As in Knapp's analysis of "Resolution and Independence" (98-129), the speaker encounters the poetic agency that mediates his own meditation (98-129).

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